C. J. BRIGHTLEY
THE SILENT PRINCE
ONCE UPON A PRINCE
A LITTLE MERMAID RETELLING

The Silent Prince

C. J. BRIGHTLEY

Spring Song Press

Series Information

Once Upon A Prince
The Unlucky Prince by Deborah Grace White
The Beggar Prince by Kate Stradling
The Golden Prince by Alice Ivinya
The Wicked Prince by Celeste Baxendell
The Midnight Prince by Angie Grigaliunas
The Poisoned Prince by Kristin J. Dawson
The Silver Prince by Lyndsey Hall
The Shoeless Prince by Jacque Stevens
The Silent Prince by C. J. Brightley
The Crownless Prince by Selina R. Gonzalez
The Awakened Prince by Alora Carter
The Winter Prince by Constance Lopez
Grab the whole Once Upon A Prince series here!

C. J. BRIGHTLEY

THE SILENT PRINCE

ONCE UPON A PRINCE

A LITTLE MERMAID RETELLING

This book is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents, and dialogue are drawn from the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

THE SILENT PRINCE. Copyright 2023 by C. J. Brightley. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information contact info@cjbrightley.com.

Paperback ISBN 9798868272677

Ebook ASIN B0C3WVMR1W

Published in the United States of America by Spring Song Press, LLC.

www.cjbrightley.com

www.springsongpress.com

Cover design by MoorBooks.

For Chloe, Megan, and Anne, who liked Kaerius first

Contents

Series Information

Full Page Image

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Next in Once Upon A Prince

Once Upon A Prince Bingo

Series Information

Afterword

About the Author

Sneak Peek

Chapter 1

Light danced through the water in a thousand shades of blue and gold.

Kaerius burst from the waves in an exultant rush, and his song might have split the sky with its beauty. His tail flashed in the brilliant dawn before he dove deep only to twist toward the surface for another joyful leap.

He sang for the joy of the morning, for the thrill of the icy water upon his skin and scales, for the ecstatic bliss of a new day full of possibilities. He sang for the deep tones of a whale song and the joy of fish flesh between his teeth, for the joy of leaping between sea and sky, and for the beauty of the droplets that caught the sunlight and cast it around in a thousand little rainbows.

He sang for the splendor of the Mer voices that echoed through the water around him, high and pure and enchanting, and for his exhilaration and pride in knowing that his voice was the loveliest and most irresistible of all.

The prince of the Mer was not humble, and he had no reason to be, for he was the fiercest, strongest, cleverest warrior his people had ever known, and he sang with power and beauty that surpassed any other. He sang with lust for all that the world offered and all that he would take from it, and for the pride of the life within him. For what reason would such a prince be humble?

Kaerius sang until the sun was well above the water, and the other Mer had retreated deeper beneath the surface to the quiet, dark depths to hunt. He admired the coruscating flash of the scales upon his tail in the sunlight. He danced in the shallows, turning circles and twisting around and around to let the light play on his scales to dazzling effect.

“Kaerius!” His father’s deep voice rang through the water, and the young prince scowled.

His tail flip was sharp with insolence, but when he reached the Mer king some three miles away and a mile beneath the surface, he said only,

“What is it, Father?”

“The sun is up. It’s time to stop singing and focus on the hunt.”

Kaerius snarled, “Why can’t I appreciate the beauty of the sunrise, Father? Why do you hate it so much?”

The Mer king took a deep, slow breath of water; every muscle of his chiseled body was tight with anger. “I do not hate the dawn, insolent child,” he said quietly. “I am glad that my sacrifices in war, and your mother’s sacrifice of her life for yours, have afforded you the luxury of spending your time singing to the uncaring sun. However, I had hoped that when you reached the age of majority, you would understand that ruling requires more than a beguiling voice and a pretty face. It requires sacrifice, Kaerius, and you’ve been sheltered from so much that I wonder if I’ve ruined you entirely.”

The young Mer prince’s mouth dropped open. “This is how you insult your best warrior? How many times did I go to battle for you?” His voice cracked with offended fury. “I haven’t been a child for years. But you wouldn’t know, would you? You stay in the depths, hiding from the light, and from me, just because I look like Mother.”

“Enough!” roared the king. “You speak of what you do not know.”

“Then tell me!” cried Kaerius. “How many times did I ask for you to give us better guidance? We won the war, and still you stayed down there, as if nothing in the light had any appeal for you.”

The Mer king’s chest heaved with the effort of keeping his temper, and his silvery hair made a pale cloud around his grim face. “Did you ever think that others made greater sacrifices than you did, and our healing comes more slowly? The war did not end as quickly and easily for me, or others, as it did for you.

“Nevertheless, I did not call you here to reprimand you for your appreciation of beauty. I called you here to focus your attention on your responsibilities. The hunt. Your life is not your own, Kaerius. You are a prince. Act like it.”

Kaerius trembled with rage. “I *am* acting like a prince! Is it not our life’s work to sing and bring joy and beauty to the world? You’ve forgotten the very purpose of our existence!”

The king snapped, “It isn’t all about you and what you enjoy! It is and has always been about sacrificing oneself for one’s people. That is why I stay in the depths. I guard our people against the Lord of the Deep! Do you

think I do not miss the light upon my face, or the taste of shallow waters? I give myself for my people day by day, and you are too self-centered to even see it."

Kaerius's nostrils flared. "Then you should be glad I sing to the dawn, since you have apparently delegated that task to me, the inadequate prince. At least I sing well." The prince knew this was a horrible thing to say; his father's throat had been nearly ripped out by a warrior of the southern Mer during the war. The king had escaped with his life only because of his exceptional strength and ferocity, but his exquisitely beautiful voice had never recovered its purest tones. The king could still sing, and his voice rippled with beauty and magic, but it was a far cry from its former glory.

Guilt twisted within Kaerius's offended anger at the sight of his father's wounded fury. He wanted his father to say something horrible in return, something that would wound him in similar manner, so that he could focus on his anger rather than his guilt and regret.

Instead, his father said stiffly, "I am glad you have not suffered as I have, Kaerius, and I am glad you recovered so easily from the pain that still troubles me. I wish you had learned a little empathy and compassion along with your skill as a warrior. Now go and hunt. The little ones are hungry."

The king disappeared into the depths before Kaerius could say anything else.

At this depth, even sharp Mer eyes could see only a short distance, and he imagined that his father was not yet far away. But he could not think of what to say.

He darted off to begin the hunt, his heart full of wounded pride.

By late afternoon, Kaerius had brought the little ones more than enough fish for their evening meal. Their mothers were capable of hunting, and their fathers… well, there were fewer Mer men of age after the war, but those who remained were easily capable of feeding their own families and the orphans and widows. The king had given Kaerius this task on principle, not out of any real need for another Mer in the hunt.

When Kaerius turned away from the nursery, he rolled his eyes and sighed in annoyance. He liked hunting, but being told to do anything

rankled.

“Thank you, Your Highness,” one of the Mer maids sang, her voice laced with magic to draw his attention.

“You’re welcome,” Kaerius said, his sharp teeth bared in a forced smile.

The maid drew closer and darted in front of him, waving her tail gracefully as if she wanted to draw his attention. “You are so gracious to the widows.” The maid reached for his hand, and he turned away, ignoring her admiration.

A sharp pain in his tail made him flinch in surprise, and he whirled to see a young Mer grinning at him.

“What?” Kaerius snarled.

“Oh, did I tweak your pride?”

Kaerius bared his sharp teeth and darted after Tehrgil. “You insufferable upstart!”

The Mer child, barely into adolescence, screamed with mirth as he swam away. He had dared nip Kaerius’s tail with his needle-sharp teeth, drawing a few drops of blood. “Prince of pomposity! Thought it would do you a little good!” His laughter tinkled through the water like the song of a newborn whale.

The prince surged forward and caught the little prankster by the tail. He turned toward the surface, hauling the now-frightened child behind him with a roar of anger.

“I AM a prince, you insulant brat! Never forget your place!” As his head broke the surface, he gave a furious flick of his tail, sending them both high into the air. At the apex of his leap, he flung the child away from him to tumble through the air and flop back into the water with an undignified slap of his tail.

Tehrgil was not hurt, of course. Mer skin was far too tough to be stung by the slap of water, even from such a height. But the young royal, a cousin much lower ranked than Kaerius himself, was suitably chastened and fled without a backward glance. Tehrgil often sought attention, usually by causing trouble, but to actually bite the prince was bold, even for him.

Kaerius roared after him, “And never draw blood near the nursery!”

If Tehrgil had looked back, he would have seen the prince twist beneath the waves with a graceful arc of his tail and then slip his head above the surface again.

A small sailing ship had been close by.

Ships were rarely of interest to Mer. If there were a storm, the ship might be dashed into pieces among the rocks and the sailors would drown. But on this coast storms were rare. Moreover, three hundred years ago the humans had built a lighthouse on the nearby promontory. Since the lighthouse, there had been only two wrecks, both before Kaerius's birth.

He had seen ships, of course, but only from a distance. Little fishing boats hugged the coast, dragging their nets behind them. Nets were dangerous; rumor said that once a mermaid had been caught in a net and killed by humans, an ocean away and several generations before. Kaerius couldn't remember the details, and imagined it was a myth anyway. If he were caught in a net, he would cut himself free with his knife or his teeth! A warrior such as himself would never fear a human. Still, the Mer folk had always been cautious of contact with humans.

The sun setting behind Kaerius seemed to gild the entire ship, and he drew closer without realizing it.

A sound carried across the water.

A strange instrument made a sweet, pure sound unlike anything Kaerius had heard before. It was like sunlight in his ears, warm and bright, sliding liquid through his veins. Another swish of his tail brought him closer, and he shook his head to fling his wet hair from his eyes.

Then another sound joined the first, a voice of dawn as the sun settled below the waves. The words were a little breathy, as if the singer were young and nervous in the most charming way, and then the singer found her confidence and her voice soared.

Waves slapped the side of the little ship, and Kaerius followed it as it drew close to the rocks, caught as surely as if he were entangled in a net.

The ship threaded the narrow passage into the harbor, and Kaerius still followed.

The instrument quieted, but the singer continued, her voice softening, until the last words carried over the water.

Kaerius sucked in a deep breath, startled to discover how close to the shore he was. What a lovely voice the singer had! She sounded near to his own age, twenty, and her voice would be a perfect counterpart to his.

That was a foolish thought. Mer did not sing with humans! They sang with the whales and the dolphins, with the crash of the waves, and with the thunder and rush of a storm.

Her voice was too soft and too human, too devoid of magic, to match his.

But he wanted to hear her again.

Chapter 2

The following week, the sea was choppy and rough. A storm was blowing in, and the humans never risked a ship in this weather.

Merfolk were not troubled by the storms; if the little ones became frightened, they could always dive into the stillness of the depths. Kaerius loved the crashing thunder, screaming winds, and the shock of lightning in the water, the sound and fury and terrible joy. He tested his strength against the thrashing waves and rode the swells into the bay, avoiding the sharp coral with a flick of his muscular tail. He swam upward until he burst from the water with the speed of his own effort and the strength of the ocean beneath him, so that he flew nearly as high as the mast of a ship and flipped end over end before he dove beneath the froth again.

He delighted in his strength, and if he thought of humans at all, it was only with understandable pity, for they were imprisoned on land, too fragile to survive in this terrible, joyous violence of wind and water.

The crack of lightning sounded different, and when Kaerius rose again, he looked around for the reason why.

A ship!

The Mer prince swam closer, laughing at the foolishness of humans. Why had they gone out so far when a storm was coming? Had they no sense of the wind?

A flicker of orange caught his attention, and he swam closer, keeping beneath the water so that the waves did not hinder his progress.

When he raised his head above the water again, he saw that the mast was ablaze. The lightning must have struck it.

Men were running about, slipping and sliding on the wet deck as the little ship pitched violently upon the waves. Screams of pain and panic rose as fire spread from the mast to the sails, and a little knot of guards clustered together on one end, as far from the swinging boom as possible.

The mast cracked, and the chaos intensified.

The storm was already dying, but the humans could not yet perceive this. Their voices were high and shrill. A wave tipped the ship precariously to one side, and then a high, clear voice screamed.

The singer!

Kaerius surged closer, his eyes sweeping across the deck of the ship. It tilted the other way, and she screamed again.

Her voice abruptly cut off.

The Mer prince ducked beneath the water, his eyes searching the frothy sea.

He clicked and listened for the echoes, but there was so much chaos in the water it was more difficult than usual to find what he sought. His strong tail and arms took him beneath the ship to the other side, where he found that more than one of the soldiers had fallen overboard. They were spitting water and shouting, their words so garbled by the waves in their faces that Kaerius could barely make out what they said.

“His Majesty!”

“Where is the king?”

Someone had already lowered a dinghy, which swung violently against the side of the ship a few feet above the water. Kaerius thought it was more likely to kill someone in the water than it was to save them.

A young sailor had come down in the little boat, risking life and limb to do so, and he loosed the ropes from the bow and stern as soon as the boat touched the water. He extended an oar toward another man who thrashed a few feet away.

Kaerius tasted blood in the water, and he ducked beneath the waves again to locate it.

There. A little dribble of blood from that man’s head. He was unconscious and would already have sunk beneath the waves but for two guards, who were struggling to keep his head above water while the boat drew closer.

Kaerius gave the boat a solid push toward the men. He watched the two men in the boat and the two in the water struggle and finally succeed in getting the injured man into the dinghy.

“Where is the princess?” one of the guards gasped.

“I thought…”

They looked around, but they could not see her.

The Mer prince sank beneath the waves, singing softly. He smelled no blood from any source other than the injured man, but there were large bodies in the water.

A tiger shark. A school of sunfish not far away. A thousand smaller fish still large enough to be tempting prey, and even smaller creatures. Pieces of cargo from the ship thrown overboard as the storm began in a futile attempt to gain enough speed to reach the sheltered harbor before the worst of the tempest. He sang to warn the shark away, and it lazily retreated into deeper water.

There. An unfamiliar sound shape. He flashed toward it.

The princess! She sank slowly, her dress floating around her in a filmy cloud like an enormous jellyfish. Her eyes were open, but she did not react when he approached. Her mouth was open too, her jaw slack, and her tiny white teeth, so dull and strange, were visible in the shadows.

He reached for her hand, and he was startled to find that her skin was incredibly soft, like the inside flesh of an oyster, though not at all slimy.

Humans needed air, and she had none.

He took her in his arms and surged toward the surface.

He did not want the humans to see him, but he did not want this strange, vulnerable creature to die, either.

Why should he care about a human? He could not think of a reason why she should matter to him, and he told himself that he felt only curiosity, not concern.

But when she did not breathe at the surface, he put one hand in the middle of her back and one hand on her chest and squeezed hard enough to feel her bones bending. A little water came up from her lungs, and he did it again so that more water came from her mouth. She took a hard gasp and coughed.

Then he streaked toward shore, leaving a white froth in his wake. Her hands trailed behind him limply, and her many layers of skirts dragged in the water.

The storm ended in a riotous crash of thunder and a sudden cessation of the wind, and in the stillness, he heard the rush of the waves upon the shore just ahead and the creak of wood and distant cries of men behind him.

At last he reached the little crescent of white sand nearest the harbor. He lunged onto the beach, pulling the human as gently as he could.

Movement was more difficult here on land, and she flopped heavily to the sand in a tangle of dark hair and sea foam and soggy cloth.

Water dribbled from her nose and her open mouth.

He pushed on her chest again, and more water came out, but she did not breathe. He put his lips to her throat, to the sensitive place just below her jaw, and there was a pulse, but only barely.

If she would not take in air on her own, he would have to help her. He expelled the water that he needed and took in a great, burning breath of air, pinched her nose closed, and pressed his lips to hers.

Chapter 3

Kaerius did not see the princess again for nearly a month, though he went to the protected little bay every day.

Why did he want to see her again? It was not in hope of her recognition or gratitude. He expected nothing from her; she had little to offer a Mer prince. Her world was above, all hard lines and air that would not sustain Mer life. He wanted nothing from her, not even for her to see him.

Still he lurked in the water, hoping to see her, without admitting to himself that he hoped she would come. He would not speak to her if he saw her. He would not show himself.

When she came one evening at dusk to sit upon a rock near the water, he watched her from a distance. She was wrapped in a long, thick fur cloak, with the hood pulled over her hair. From a distance, she looked like a small, fuzzy lump upon the boulders tumbled at the foot of the cliff. The wind blew from the ocean toward her, and he wondered whether human senses were sharp enough to smell him at this distance. He could not smell her, for the direction of the wind was wrong.

At first, he was not even sure that it was her, but he imagined it was.

As the fading light grew dimmer, he drew closer to her, letting only his eyes and the top of his head out of the water. When the wind quieted, he tasted her scent in the breeze, and he smiled to himself. He could almost see her expression at this distance, but he did not think she could see him.

She stared out across the water without a sound for nearly an hour, and he drew still closer as the world grew darker. At last, when the world was lit only by starlight, he was only a few dozen feet away, still apparently unnoticed.

Her breath hitched, and she brushed tears from her cheeks.

Why was she crying? She had lived, after all. She appeared no worse for her ordeal.

Cautiously, he breathed the very softest line of a Mer song, an invitation to comfort and confidence. Was she afraid or grieving? Lonely? Disappointed? He added a note of courage and strength.

She could not possibly hear him, or at least not enough to understand with her conscious mind that she was hearing a sound rather than merely feeling emotions. But his song, lovely and ethereal and rich with Mer magic, soothed her. She buried her face in her hands and sat quietly, her shoulders shuddering, until she wiped the tears from her face and leaned back on her hands to stare at the sky.

Kaerius looked at her dim form and wondered what it was like to live above water. Her booted feet swung against the stone just above the little wavelets that lapped against the rough surface.

She hummed under her breath, a strange tune utterly unlike any he had heard before. After some minutes, her voice strengthened and she sang, her voice breathy and soft.

The Mer prince listened, transfixed without knowing why. The princess's voice had no magic in it, no power of enchantment or allure, and while it might have been a lovely voice for a human, it did not compare to the ethereal purity of Mer song. She hit neither the ringing high notes nor the deepest lows of the Mer range, and there was a human thickness to the sound which seemed embarrassingly untalented.

Yet he did not want to swim away. Her song struck him with such vulnerable sweetness that he had no defense against it.

He wanted no defense against it.

His heart filled with wonder and awe, and he listened until she quieted, rose, and strode away across the darkened beach.

Male voices greeted her at the bottom of the cliff, and she murmured an acknowledgment.

The Mer prince listened as she and the men walked up the rocky path until the sound of their steps was lost in the sound of the salt breeze.

As often as he could, Kaerius swam to the secluded little beach and watched for the princess.

“What do you want from her?” his cousin Kali said one day. “She’s a human. She has nothing to offer you.”

Kaerius shrugged one shoulder. “I don’t want anything. I just like listening to her. That’s all.”

The sound of Kali’s laughter seemed bold and rude, and Kaerius scowled at him.

“A human voice is like the shrieking of a gull. Why torment yourself with such ugliness?” Kali drew closer, his sharp teeth showing as he smiled. “I suppose it is pleasant to compare your voice to hers. Not that your ego needs encouragement.” Kali was Kaerius’s closest friend and Tehrgil’s oldest brother, and though he usually acted with more propriety than Tehrgil did, he also enjoyed pricking Kaerius’s dignity.

The prince snapped, “What does it matter why I listen? Is it not my right to spend my leisure time as I wish? Is anyone starving because I have not hunted enough for them? Is there a war at hand that I am neglecting?”

Kali withdrew a little, studying the prince. “No, Your Highness,” he said at last. “It costs your people nothing for you to be so fascinated by a human. I merely seek to understand my future king, so that I may serve well in years to come.”

Kaerius eyed him coldly. “Not for many years, of course. My father and I have our disagreements, but I do not envy his authority.”

The younger royal sighed. “Your Highness, you know I meant no threat to His Majesty. What has put you in such a mood?”

“I just want to listen to the human sing,” muttered Kaerius resentfully.

“I am not preventing you,” Kali said quietly.

Kaerius’s golden hair streamed behind him as he darted into the protected little bay, leaving his cousin and his cares behind him in the deeper water.

The human girl’s song seemed innocent, sweet, and tinged with an appealing sort of melancholy that tugged at his heart. Sometimes the sadness was more prominent in her voice, and sometimes it seemed that she had nearly forgotten it.

Kaerius was sorely tempted to thread his voice with the command that she tell him what weighed upon her heart. Yet every time he opened his mouth to do so, he felt a strange twinge of grief and guilt.

What was a confidence worth, if it was shared only under duress? Would it not be sweeter to let her confide in him when she was ready?

As summer turned to fall and then winter, he sought her nearly every night, but she came only rarely to the beach, and most nights she did not sing.

She did not speak often, either, apparently wanting only to listen to the waves and the wind.

A thousand times he opened his mouth to speak to her, but a thousand times he squashed the impulse. If he spoke to her, he would have to explain to his father why he had broken a thousand years of tradition on a silly impulse.

It would be easier to explain compelling a human to confide in him than merely voicing his presence and desire for friendship. What exactly did he want from her?

No, it would be better to understand his strange fascination with her before he spoke.

Late in the spring, Kali again followed Kaerius to the entrance to the bay. The sun was setting behind them over the deep water, and Kaerius looked over the choppy waves for a moment, just long enough to see that the girl was not on the beach. Perhaps she would not come tonight.

“Come away from there,” Kali said. “You’ve wasted half the year pining after a human who doesn’t know you exist, and for what purpose? Why should your eyes go soft when you think of a flat-toothed human with no magic in her voice?”

Kaerius huffed. “Can I not love whom I choose?” He sneered at the younger Mer. “If she knew I existed, she would fall head over feet for me in a moment!”

“Love?” Kali said in shock.

The prince was equally surprised at the word, but it settled in to his heart as a truth he had not yet understood, not a word to be disavowed. “Yes,” he said firmly. “I do love her.”

All of a sudden, Kaerius felt the immense power of his father’s presence below him.

“Am I to understand that you have been pining after a human?” the Mer king said, his voice dark with anger. “How did such a travesty come to pass?”

Kaerius squared his shoulders and bared his teeth proudly. “Why should I not court a human, Your Majesty? These Mer women are too

enamored with my status as your heir. I am intrigued because she knows nothing of me, nothing of my power or status."

The king hissed, his sharp teeth glinting in the dim light. "Why should you not court a human? Have you lost your mind? Humans have no love of Mer, and there is no reason for us to care for them, with their nets and their spears and their scratchy, uncouth voices."

Kaerius blinked. "Do they even know we exist?"

"They used to." The king's expression did not soften. "It has been hundreds of years since any contact between our peoples. If they still remember, it is likely only as legend or myth."

"Then why should she not love me?" Kaerius grinned fiercely. "I am beautiful and powerful, and she should be honored that I have given her a thought at all! I will court her!"

"You will not, you insolent child!" the king roared. "Have you heard nothing? Understood nothing? Humans are foolish, unmagical, ugly land-dwellers, and they have nothing to offer any Mer, much less you! Have a care for your own dignity! And if you are too short-sighted to understand how this affects you, Kaerius, then think of the dignity of all Mer."

Kaerius narrowed his eyes at his father. "Shall I not bring dignity to the seas by making a treaty with the humans? Have I not sacrificed my own happiness often enough for you? I *want* her, Father, and I will have her!"

He darted away so quickly that his father, fierce as he was, eventually lost him in the depths.

But Kali stuck close on his tail for another half hour, until they were two miles below the surface, far deeper than the younger Mer had ever swam.

Finally Kaerius whirled. "This does not concern you! Go away, Kali."

The younger Mer was too breathless with the lightning-fast flight through the deeps to say anything at first, and only when Kaerius looked away did he gasp, "It's dangerous here, Your Highness!"

"Then go to the shallow waters!" Kaerius snarled. "I never asked you to come!"

"But I didn't want you to be alone here." Kali's voice was sharp with offended pride. "Two Mer are better than one when facing danger, and there are many dangers in the deeps."

Kaerius rolled his eyes, even though he knew Kali couldn't see him do it. "Go home! I don't need your protection. I'm more dangerous than

anything down here.”

A faint ominous shift in the water was the only warning they had, and even Kaerius’s sharp senses were not quick enough to perceive it in time to flee.

Chapter 4

Something wrapped around his chest, waist, and tail and pulled him downward with sickening speed for a moment before he was brought to a swaying stop.

"Have you forgotten me, little prince?"

The voice reverberated in Kaerius's bones. "I…"

A sound as soft as snowflakes whispered through the water, and it took Kaerius a moment to realize that the monster was chuckling.

"Who are you?" Kaerius whispered. His voice did not shake, but he could feel Kali's trembling fear to his left, just a bit too far away for him to put a reassuring hand upon the younger Mer's shoulder.

If he could have, he would have signed for Kali to flee, but he could not move his hands, and it was much too dark for Kali to see him anyway. Besides, Kali was no doubt equally trapped in the kraken's powerful tentacles.

"The only thing in the water your father fears."

Kali gave an undignified little whimper.

"I confess I had forgotten for a moment you were in these waters, Lord of the Deep," Kaerius managed at last. "I would be much obliged if you would let my young cousin go. If one of us offended you, it would surely have been me."

A faint purple glow made Kaerius blink and turn away for a moment. It was not exactly bright, but it was piercing and strange, and it illuminated the kraken's enormous beak with an unearthly light.

"Yes, I am offended," the beast said quietly. "But the young one can go."

He must have released his grip on Kali, for the young Mer darted away without a word. Kaerius did not expect him to stay and fight for his prince; Kali was untested in battle, and the Lord of the Deep was far too fierce an

opponent for one Mer to best, even Kaerius himself. Kali would likely return with reinforcements.

The enormous tentacle that wrapped around Kaerius tightened around his tail and chest until he gasped, “Do you mean to crush me?”

As the water rushed from his mouth, he tried to inhale again and found that the pressure was far too great. His ribs were almost cracking, and he would have thrashed in panic if his arms and tail had not been immobilized too.

Then the pressure eased, and he sucked in a bare breath of water, just enough to keep him conscious.

“Not yet,” said the kraken, with a hint of dangerous mirth in his voice. “Why does the golden prince of the Mer grace these dark depths with his presence?”

Kaerius strained against the pressure and managed another desperate breath. “I did not mean to intrude,” he whispered.

“Is that so?” The kraken’s voice grew a little darker. “Your father and I have a history, little prince, and little love between us. How am I to interpret this intrusion except as a deliberate insult and declaration of war?”

“The northern Mer have no desire for war with you,” Kaerius’s mind danced between the panic of suffocation and the horrifying thought of starting a war with the Lord of the Deep. “What shall I do to prove my honest intentions?”

The pressure upon his chest eased a little, and his chest heaved as he sucked in a steadying breath of water. His head felt strange and light, and the purple light and deep shadows that fell across the kraken’s monstrous beak had a hypnotic fascination.

“Tell me what caused you to flee into my domain,” said the kraken softly. “What could cause the honored and beloved prince of the northern Mer to lose his head so completely?”

“I haven’t lost my head,” said Kaerius, but his voice felt distant and flat. “Your magic is very strong.” He swallowed, forcing his mind back to something like clarity. “I was… I was troubled,” he managed.

“By what?” Perhaps the monstrous creature smiled, or perhaps he merely opened his beak in a silent, ominous display of power.

Kaerius felt his heart thudding raggedly. “My father and I disagree on matters of the heart,” he said at last.

“Yours or his?”

“Mine.” Kaerius frowned, feeling cautiously reassured by the fact that the kraken had not killed him yet.

The Lord of the Deep laughed softly, and the Mer prince shuddered. The creature was nearly a thousand times his size, and older than time as far as the Mer knew, and he had never heard of it laughing. He wanted to be offended, but even he, in all his arrogance, was not foolish enough to voice his displeasure.

“I was not joking,” he said stiffly. “I have heard you have great magic. Perhaps, if you think me so amusing, you might aid me in my suit.”

The Lord of the Deep turned one great, violet eye toward Kaerius. “Do you not think it rather impertinent to ask the aid of one whom you have so recently offended by your very presence?” His voice was soft and dangerous. “What would you ask, in your foolish, youthful insolence?”

“I have fallen in love with a human princess,” Kaerius said in a rush. “I wish to court her on land and make an alliance between our peoples. Would it not serve your ends as well as those of the Mer for there to be an alliance between humans and Mer?”

“I have no contact with humans, and I wish for little contact with Mer.” The kraken’s beak opened in what might have been a horrifying smile.

The water suddenly seemed colder around the Mer prince, and although the cold did not trouble him, it did seem more openly threatening than the kraken’s soft voice.

But the creature said nothing else, and his grip on Kaerius loosened.

“You are free to go,” said the kraken. “Take your life and freedom as a gift, little prince, and tell your father I was generous. I may not be so generous next time.”

Kaerius hesitated, and then said, “Thank you, Lord of the Deep.”

Then he fled, heart pounding.

Chapter 5

The terror of the encounter with the kraken was not enough to humble Kaerius for long. Only two days later, he swam back to the bay just after dusk, delighted to find that the princess was already on the rock she preferred.

He breathed the softest hint of a song of joy and trust, his voice far too quiet to be heard by human ears. The magic thrummed in the air with power and purpose, indistinguishable from the salty sea breeze to human senses.

The princess sighed and leaned back on her hands, looking up at the fading glow upon the horizon and then tilted her head farther back to see the stars splashed across the sky like glittering bits of mica against the infinite depths.

Kaerius was so close he might have touched her boots, if he had lunged upward from the water. He could have dragged her into the sea, if he'd leapt from the water entirely. He bared his teeth, imagining the sirens of old feasting on human flesh.

His teeth were sharp, but he had no desire to bury them in her neck as if she were an enemy. He wanted to croon soft, sweet things to her and for her to smile at him in adoration.

The princess shifted and lay back with her arms crossed behind her head, her profile almost hidden behind the ruff of her fur cloak.

"I wish you were here," she whispered. "Really here, not just… not like this."

Kaerius nearly leaped from the water in his surprise, but she was not looking in his direction. She still looked up at the sky, as if the one she spoke to were up in the heavens rather than a mere arm's length away.

The prince breathed just a little more magic into the air, his song inaudible but laced with power.

Her breath hitched a little, and she whispered, "I don't want to do this alone."

Kaerius opened his mouth, and then closed it again. She could not possibly be speaking to him. He *knew* this, but her plea demolished the few remaining defenses he had kept around his heart, and he gave it to her unreservedly, holding nothing back.

Or he thought he did.

Not many minutes afterwards, the princess rose and pulled her cloak close around her before retreating up the sand to the rocky path where her escorts waited. Kaerius bared his teeth and hissed to himself in annoyance at the sound of their masculine voices. He should have spoken to her when he'd had the chance.

He could call her to him and tell her of his love.

No, it would be boorish to command her to attend him. She had retreated to her palace already.

He would go to her, to court her on land, where she had power and authority. He would win her by the strength of his arms, the perfection of his face, and the transcendent beauty of his voice, not with his title or authority.

Kaerius darted out of the bay to the deep water and circled far around the place where his father would be before diving deeper into the abyss.

Chapter 6

Lord of the Deep!” Kaerius sang softly, his voice laced with power.

“You dare intrude upon me again, little prince?” The voice startled Kaerius both with its nearness and the deep, quiet mirth in it. “You are brave, indeed.”

“You were gracious to me once, so I dared imagine you might be so again,” the prince said. A Mer of lesser courage would have already fled, but Kaerius’s voice did not even shake, and he smiled, pleased with himself. His heart thudded with fear, but he would not acknowledge it.

“Flattery,” rumbled the kraken, “is boring.”

“It is the truth,” said Kaerius, putting all his earnest excitement into his voice and his smile. It was too dark for him to see the kraken, but if the kraken could see him, he would see Kaerius’s confidence. “I have come to request your aid in a matter of great importance to me.”

Water shifted softly around the Mer prince, as if the kraken were moving beneath and around him on all sides, but he heard no response for nearly a full minute.

“Why should I care about what troubles you?” said the creature at last. “The conflicts of the Mer are of no import to me.”

“I do not ask you to care,” conceded Kaerius. “I ask only for your aid. I have heard the legends of your magic, and I think you are powerful enough even for this.”

The kraken was silent, and Kaerius had the disconcerting impression it was moving away from him, as if entirely uninterested in his words.

“I love a human!” Kaerius said hurriedly. “I wish to court her upon land. Is your magic strange enough and strong enough to give me legs?”

There was a faint rumble, but Kaerius could not decipher any identifiable emotion or question from it. He waited, his heartbeat thudding in his ears, for the kraken’s next words.

“Why should I indulge your impulsive rebellion against your father?” said the creature at last.

“It is not merely rebellion,” Kaerius snapped. “I love her with all my heart, and—”

“All your heart,” murmured the kraken, his soft voice strangely incongruous with the click of his beak. “Am I supposed to be impressed?”

Kaerius’s chest heaved with his offended fury. “I don’t care about your opinion!” he cried. “I want to make a bargain with you! What do you want in return for your aid?”

“You want legs and lungs,” said the creature, with an edge of menace in his soft voice. “That is a great deal of magic. What will you wager with me for the legs you so desire?”

Kaerius’s skin tingled with reckless hope and desire. “A wager?” he asked, trying not to sound too eager. “I had planned to offer you a song to make this dark abyss as bright and magnificent as any sunrise.”

Water shifted, and Kaerius strained to see anything of the beast’s monstrous shape in the inky depths.

“Your voice is rather pretty,” said the kraken, as if conceding a point in an argument. “And I think it would be more than a little enjoyable to sing to myself with it when I am bored. Give me your voice, little prince, and I will give you the legs you wish for.”

The Mer prince narrowed his eyes, imagining that the kraken might be able to see him. “For how long?”

“Forever,” murmured the kraken, in a voice like despair.

Kaerius felt strangely cold. “No.” His voice cracked. “I can’t give my voice away forever. My father… I can’t do that to him. I will give it to you only for a short time, and you must swear not to use it to harm my people.”

A soft laugh sounded, cold and alien, and the kraken said, “Are you in a position to be dictating terms, little prince?”

“You want what I have,” said Kaerius proudly. “I will lend it to you. Give me legs and human lungs and everything else necessary to live as a human for one month. If, at the end of that month, she loves me, then you must give me back my voice, and you must give me legs or tail as I please, whenever I please, for the rest of my natural life, and the same for her, so that we may rule happily on both land and sea and never have to be separated!”

“And if at the end of that month, she does not love you, I keep your voice for myself?” mused the Lord of the Deep. “It is an appealing offer. If she does not reciprocate your love at the end of thirty days, I keep your voice, and you lose your life and title.”

“You can’t kill me on land. What if I stay upon land and never swim in the sea again?” Kaerius snapped.

One huge eye suddenly opened in front of Kaerius’s face, and he twitched in surprise and quickly hidden fear. The unearthly light that emanated from the eye was a shade of purple-green that Kaerius had not even imagined, much less expected to see here in the darkest part of the ocean.

“I can indeed, little prince,” the kraken said, his voice even softer and more ominous. “Your lungs will expire at dawn on the thirty first day, and you will die a wretched death if you have not earned her love by then.”

“If I have?” said Kaerius. “How will I prove it to you?”

“The magic will know.” The kraken clicked his beak gently. “Do you accept, little prince? Will you wager your life and title for the love of a human?”

“You swear not to use my voice to harm my people?” Kaerius whispered. “And when she loves me, your magic will let us live and rule on land and in the sea, as you said.”

“Indeed. Think before you speak, little prince. This is not a bargain to be made lightly.”

Kaerius swallowed. “I accept your offer, Lord of the Deep.”

The beast grinned, his beak glinting in the strange purple light. At a wave of the kraken’s tentacles, Kaerius’s tail split into two bare legs.

Kaerius choked, the water in his lungs suddenly hostile to his new human life. He gagged, swimming desperately for the surface. Beneath him, the kraken’s laugh reverberated through the depths.

How strange for a merman to be drowning! The thought cut through his desperate struggle for breath, lungs burning, water and air intermingled in exquisite torture. So this was what the humans had suffered as they died! Such agony.

Panic gave him strength, and he gagged again, inhaling desperately, salt water burning in his eyes.

Kaerius’s head broke the surface in a rush, and he coughed and gasped with his eyes closed against the salt spray and glittering light.

The cold sapped his strength, though he wasn't yet aware of it. When he could gather his scattered wits, he set off toward shore, swimming with the familiar rippling motion that had been most efficient when he'd had his tail. Now it felt awkward, his legs bending only at the hips, knees, and ankles, no longer a smooth surge of muscle. He wondered distantly what his legs looked like, though he spared no more thought for them yet.

The swim to shore seemed interminable. He'd never felt so awkward and slow in the water; it had always been a world of effortless strength and exuberance. He crawled onto the sand nearly three hours later, exhausted beyond imagining, his lungs still burning and half-filled with salt water.

Naked, he sprawled at the water's edge, eyes closed against the brilliant sunshine. The light was a yellow more suited to late spring than the end of winter, but the icy wind stole any hint of warmth.

Kaerius felt darkness gathering behind his eyelids, an unfamiliar sensation of weakness invading his limbs. Stubbornly, he pushed himself up to his hands and knees, swaying slightly. He let his head hang down, sand-filled hair falling over his eyes. Then he staggered to his feet, nearly falling from weakness and the strange awkwardness of his new legs. He looked down at himself, dazed, dizziness nearly overtaking him.

A sound came from behind him, and he spun, losing his balance and falling in an undignified jumble of limbs.

"What happened to you?" It was *her*, of course. He had meant to find her when he was a little more familiar with this world. He would woo her from a position of strength.

Instead, she found him now, when he had not yet figured out these legs. Sand was everywhere, in all the cracks of his new limbs, between his buttocks, in his teeth, and crusted into his hair.

Was she laughing at him? Scorning him? He would die of mortification if she mocked him!

She stared down at him, a dark silhouette against the brilliant sky.

"What happened to your clothes?" Her eyes did a quick, involuntary once-over of his naked body and then fixed on his face with obvious determination.

He opened his mouth, then closed it again. He made a helpless gesture, then coughed again, bending over to vomit salty water and sand. Muscles hurt in strange ways, an ache suffusing his entire torso as he gagged.

Kaerius looked up, breathless and only half-conscious.

She knelt beside him, still silhouetted to his dazzled vision. “Were you washed overboard from a ship? What happened to you?”

He closed his eyes, every breath burning in his chest. A shiver coursed through him. Was this what cold felt like? It was a strange sensation, a shuddering that started at his bones. Tiny bumps had covered his skin, and he glanced down at his arm, marveling at the fine hairs standing defiantly against the wind. Sand and salt glinted in the light.

“Are you mind-sick?” she asked. “Why don’t you answer me? Do you understand me?”

He looked up again. Darkness flickered at the edges of his vision, and he wondered distantly what that meant. It seemed like a bad thing, somehow, although the feeling was not entirely unpleasant. It seemed… portentous.

“Can you breathe yet? Do you think you can walk to the inn? I can give you some money, and you can get a room and a hot meal.”

She edged a little closer and pressed a small, heavy bag into his hands. Then she wrapped her own cloak around his shoulders. “Up on your feet now.” She put her small shoulder under his arm and hauled him upward with a soft grunt of effort. “You’re heavier than you look!” She kept her hand on his arm until he steadied himself.

“Can you not talk?” She stepped back and stared at him. “Shake your head like this for no. Nod for yes.” She demonstrated.

He shook his head, the motion making the world spin. She grabbed his arm again when he swayed, taking the little bag back from him. “Never mind. You’re in no shape to be walking to the inn. Sit down here against the stone, and I’ll send the physician down to take a look at you. Can you do that?”

She tugged him toward the cliff to an outcropping of stone that would offer a little shelter from the wind. He stumbled and nearly fell, but she caught his arm and supported him another few steps until he collapsed in a heap on the sand not even halfway to the cliffside.

“You’re a strange one.” Her voice had a strangled quality to it, which he noted as something to figure out later. She tugged the cloak around his shoulders more tightly and flipped the cloth over his legs and torso. “Someone will be back soon. They’ll come down that path right there. The passage up from the beach is just there. Do you see it?”

He nodded, feeling a bit of stubborn strength returning. A merman of his lineage would not succumb so easily to the battering of the sea.

“Good.” She gave him a skeptical look.

He did not want someone to take a look at him yet, while he still felt so wobbly and strange. So he staggered to his feet.

“Sit down,” she said. “I’ll send someone to you. With a hot meal in you, you’ll feel much better. Just wait here.”

What was a hot meal? He stared at her in growing confusion. The world would not stop its strange spinning, and his body shivered in a way it never had before. Why were his hands shaking as he held them out to her?

It was mortifying.

“You could go to the inn if you really wanted,” she said doubtfully.

He tilted his head. What was an inn?

“Never mind. Just wait here. I’ll send someone for you as soon as I return. They’ll come down that path right there, so just stay where they can find you. Don’t worry.”

She set off briskly up the path.

Kaerius stared after her.

Chapter 7

The cloak that hung from his shoulders whipped in the wind, pressed against his body as he trudged up the beach. There were several clasps at the throat, but he did not see them and did not think to look for them, for his eyes were watering in the frigid wind, and the strange shivering that racked his body took more attention than the cloth.

He held the cloak against his chest as he stumbled up the narrow, rocky path, more out of concern that the cloak would blow away than any desire for its warmth. He turned uphill when he reached the road. She had told him that the inn was at the bottom of the hill, but he did not want the inn, whatever it was. He wanted her. He had seen her looking out over the sea from far up the cliffside more than once, so he felt he was far more likely to find her uphill than down. Besides, his beloved was a princess, and, while strange, this great stone edifice was clearly the palace. She must live inside it.

The wind was partially blocked by a low stone wall on the cliff side of the road, and the palace on the other side made the wind that came over the wall swirl in ways that confused his senses. His feet had little fingers at the ends of them, and they stretched wide on the flagstones. The feeling was so strange and fascinating that he knelt to examine the odd appendages.

Then he shoved himself upright and staggered up the road. Though they looked different here in the world of air, doors were still identifiable as doors, so he investigated each one before climbing higher.

At last he found the door that seemed most promising, with the faint hint of the princess's fingers upon the edge and several other human scents upon the wood. Though he could barely walk and the world of air was already more challenging than he had anticipated, at least the Lord of the Deep had left him his sharp Mer senses.

Frigid raindrops spattered against his face. His hair dripped icy water down his back and chest and whipped into his eyes.

He felt strange and dizzy, and he coughed again, spitting out saltwater that burned as it came up. He leaned against the door and slid down to sit with his back against it. The cloak rode up against his back, and he pulled it off and held it to his face. What a kind gesture from the princess! He pressed his cheek to the sodden fabric, and though the cloth was too wet to give off her scent, when he touched his tongue to it, he tasted her skin, as sweet and fresh as sunlight through the clouds. His affection for her was entirely justified.

He looked up at the iron grey sky. A storm was coming.

Kaerius shivered, pulling his new legs in close against his body. The pelting rain stole the fragile heat from his skin; the feeling of being chilled was unfamiliar, and he did not at first understand that it was dangerous as well as unpleasant. The stone behind him scraped his back as his shivers intensified. He turned to examine the rock and mortar, letting his soft fingers run over the abrasive surfaces, then looking at his wet fingertips. How strange! Before, his skin had been smooth as pearl and tough as sharkskin. Now the skin of his fingertips had tiny ridges, wrinkling as they soaked in the freezing rain.

He leaned forward to lick the stone, pondering the taste. Salt from the sea spray, familiar and reassuring, and the faint undertone of gull guano, any visible signs long since washed away, lingering only to his extraordinary senses. The distant hint of something unfamiliar and organic, perhaps pollen or the tang of pine.

He rested his forehead against the rock wall, letting the roughness bring him back to himself for a moment. The cold was making him sleepy. That too, was strange. Never before had cold been stupefying; always it had been simply a fact. If anything, cold had been invigorating; when snowflakes landed on a choppy sea, he had played in the spray with Kali, their tails flicking the spray up, up into the air.

His fingers had a faint blue tinge now, the nail beds a bruised purple. Was that from the cold, or an unrelated phenomenon? His head dropped to rest against his knees. They were bony and strange, so unlike his smooth tail. He flexed the little fingers on his feet, admiring the tiny, fragile bones

and delicate nails. His arms and legs had white-blond hairs that stuck to his wet skin.

Kaerius was human in every way that he could see. He was pleased with the kraken's thoroughness and disconcerted by the vulnerability of his nakedness. His skin was so soft and fragile, easily scratched by the stone and sensitive to the impact of every raindrop.

His alertness faded. At first it was only a strange, delicious ennui that accompanied the shivers. His weak, human body no longer resisted the cold but accepted it, the icy rain hitting his cold skin and running in rivulets through his hair, down his bare shoulders and the hard point of his hip, down the length of his legs and feet. What strange things feet were, with a knobby joint above the foot and stubby little fingers at the end!

Kaerius, child of the sea, fell into darkness and cold. His clenched hands relaxed, and he slid a little sideways, and then a little more, so that he lay on his side, only his shoulders and one arm against the door. His shivers persisted long after he lost consciousness, but eventually they faded, leaving only an occasional shudder.

Chapter 8

A solid thump on the back of his head jolted him forward, and he curled into himself, only distantly aware of the chill that fogged his mind and stiffened his fingers. He had the vague impression of darkness. Perhaps it was night, or perhaps he hadn't actually opened his eyes as he had intended to.

"Get off the palace doorstep, you halfwit!" The sharp words were followed by another blow to the back of his broad shoulders.

"What?" a voice called from farther away.

"A naked beggar is at the door," the woman snapped. "I'll have Brighton throw him out."

Hard fingers dug into his biceps, but he could not muster up the energy to protest.

A deeper voice said something which Kaerius could not understand.

"How did he get up here? He could barely stand up!" the princess interjected.

Then he was dragged across a hard floor and hefted to flop into something that felt like a kelp bed, soft and enclosing, but there were no tendrils to tangle in his hair. Something fuzzy and strange settled over him, and the voices continued overhead, but he could no longer keep track of what was speech and what was the roaring in his head.

He dreamed of gulls screaming overhead, the crash of waves, and the bargain he had made with the Lord of the Deep. He woke with a start, his mind full of the kraken's beak and a thousand barbed suckers on thrashing tentacles.

"You're finally awake," the same deep voice said, and Kaerius forced his gummy eyelids open. What a strange feeling it was to be so dazed, still half in the dream, his skin crawling with chills, even as he focused on the man across from him.

He had no interest in the man; he had not bargained away his voice and princely status to make friends with men. He wanted the princess. When she saw him, she would recognize his strength, beauty, and honor, and she would love him. As she should!

“Why were you on Her Royal Highness’s doorstep, naked as the day you were born, except for Her Royal Highness’s cloak?” The man’s eyes were a steely blue, hard and skeptical, and he held a long, sharp dagger in one hand, which he had apparently been sharpening before Kaerius woke.

The Mer prince struggled to a sitting position, finding to his dismay that it took far more effort than he had imagined. He felt as weak and useless as a piece of sea foam.

“Answer the question.” The man studied him for a moment, then huffed out a soft breath through his nose and turned his attention to the knife in his hand. He stroked a sharpening stone down the blade with practiced skill.

Kaerius swallowed. At the man’s look, Kaerius made a vague, helpless gesture at his mouth.

“Are you mute as well as witless?”

Kaerius shot to his feet in outrage, for of all the insults ever leveled at him, no one had ever dared call him stupid to his face. Then the room whirled, and he would have fallen on his face but for the fact that his interrogator caught him and let him back down to the couch with surprising kindness.

The amused smile that now played across the man’s face did not endear him to Kaerius in the slightest, but he did appreciate the help enough to duck his head in acknowledgement. He was a prince, after all, and a prince should acknowledge the good service of those beneath them.

“All right. You can’t speak. You owe Her Royal Highness your life, because Jill and I would have thrown you out on your ear for having dared clutter up the doorstep with your embarrassingly unclothed self.” The man’s white teeth flashed in a quick, dangerous smile. “Her Royal Highness said she didn’t want to feel responsible for having left a mind-sick man out in weather like this. She sent men back to the beach to find you and offer you help, but you were gone. Now that you’re here, you’re to be given warm clothes, a few days to recover here if you’re ill, and a bit of money to start you on your way.”

Kaerius blinked. That was remarkably generous of the princess, and he wondered whether she was so kind to everyone who came to her door.

“Do you understand?” the man prompted.

Kaerius nodded, his golden hair falling over his face. He could not remember when it had ever been so dry, and he reached up to feel the strangeness of the fluff upon his head. His long golden waves were thoroughly tangled, and he scowled as he felt the sand beneath his fingertips and under his nails. His lips were salty.

“Here.” The man passed him a heavy mug which seemed to be made of ice, for it glittered in the lamplight.

Kaerius took one sip and flinched, for the taste of fresh water was strange and disagreeable. It was sweet and alien, and for a moment he did not want it at all. Then his thirst overcame him, and he realized that his body must be human in this regard, too, for humans did not drink salt water, and his thirst would not be quenched by the familiar richness of the ocean.

He drained the glass and held it up so he could see the lantern light dance through the angles of the design. The smile that crossed his face was of childlike wonder, and the guard’s frown relaxed.

“Never seen crystal like that, have you?” the man asked. “It’s beautiful, but it’s hardly magic.”

Kaerius huffed in amusement at himself and handed the cup back. He gestured at the man inquiringly. If he must interact with this man, he ought to do so with knowledge of him and his position in relation to the princess.

For the princess was the goal, and Kaerius did not want to waste any time.

“I’m Captain Derek Brighton, personal guard to Her Royal Highness. Can you write?”

Kaerius offered his name-sign and title, but Brighton merely frowned. “You’ve been mute long enough to have a signed language?”

The Mer prince frowned and shook his head.

The guard picked up an eagle quill with an oddly shaped end and a pale sheet of some unknown substance and offered it to Kaerius.

The prince tilted his head and frowned more deeply. *What is that for?*

Brighton wrote a series of squiggles with practiced ease. “That’s my name. Can you write?” he asked.

Kaerius shook his head. This was a strange form of magic indeed, if names and perhaps other words could be inscribed upon a surface. Was this

meant to be understood, or was it merely for one's own amusement? Still, he refused to be too awed. The humans would be equally awed if they knew how the Mer folk could sing in the depths and communicate over long distances with only their voices and excellent hearing.

"Her Royal Highness specified that you were to be fed generously. So follow me, and we'll get you dressed and get some food in you." Brighton crossed the room to stand by an open door.

The Mer prince stood more cautiously this time, unwilling to experience that sickening spinning darkness again.

Brighton looked away. "Put the blanket around your shoulders, man! Haven't you any sense of decency? Cover yourself!"

Kaerius wrapped the blanket around his shoulders and was dismayed to find that the warmth was welcome. Human bodies were so weak and fragile! His hands were trembling violently, and he couldn't decide if it was from shock or cold or something else. His bare feet felt like ice blocks upon the stone floor, and he was clumsy with fatigue and cold and the sheer strangeness of legs. He tripped over nothing, for it was so strange to feel the ground with his little feet-fingers that he could barely look up enough to see where he was going.

"Are you always this clumsy?" said Brighton in amusement. "You walk like you've never done it before."

Kaerius snarled silently to himself and stopped in his tracks.

Merfolk had sharp, triangular teeth much like those of sharks, and the sudden shock of dull, plant-eater teeth in the Mer prince's mouth was enough to cause him to bring one hand up to feel them in disgusted horror. He ran his tongue around his mouth and felt his front teeth with his fingers, barely conscious of his companion's confusion.

"Just realized you have teeth?" Brighton muttered. "You need some sleep, man, and maybe a physician."

The prince shrugged away from the man's steadying hand with half-hearted irritation, for the immensity of his bargain was pressing upon him with sudden weight. How would he defend himself from threats with dull teeth? How would he win the princess's regard if he could not fight?

What if Brighton himself aspired to win the princess?

Kaerius stepped away and looked at his guide.

Brighton was tall and dark-haired, with a heavy shadow of a beard. The substantial muscles of his shoulders and his erect posture, the easy

friendliness of his smile and the comfortable skill with which his hand rested on his sword, combined to give him a graceful, athletic dignity that Kaerius suddenly recognized as threatening. Brighton was disgustingly attractive, and Kaerius narrowed his eyes in resentment.

“Come on, then,” Brighton said. “You’re swaying like a newborn foal. Let’s get you some dinner.” His voice didn’t reciprocate any of Kaerius’s resentment, and the prince’s gut clenched in furious annoyance.

Brighton must not win the princess.

The prince followed his guard down the shadowed hall to a spiral staircase that seemed carved out of the rock of the cliff itself. It would have been dark too, but light from below reflected up its curve.

“There’s a rail here if you’re unsteady,” said Brighton, and the prince snarled again to himself, though he made no sound. There was no shame in not knowing how to walk; no Mer had ever braved such a strange experience before, and Kaerius was sure he was doing quite as well as anyone else would have. Still, the man’s assumption that he needed help rankled.

However, when he took the first step and felt the strange jolt of falling down to the next step, he could not pretend to himself that he was not disconcerted by this horrible construction. His stomach twisted, and he put one hand upon the railing after all, unsure exactly how that was supposed to help.

He stumbled down the stairs and nearly fell at the bottom, his cheeks hot with annoyance and embarrassment. He had been so sure he could do anything a human could do, and better, but here he was nearly tumbling down these horrid stairs as if they were some sort of challenge, while Brighton caught him under one arm with a strong hand and steadied him.

Kaerius pulled away, unwilling to accept help from anyone, much less a possible rival.

Brighton studied him. “Are you still dizzy? The physician should be here by the time you finish eating. But we’ll get you dressed first.”

Humans wore clothes on their bodies, and Kaerius’s gaze flicked up and down Brighton again. His trousers were of fine, dark blue cloth, and at the bottom of his legs, the edge of the trousers fell over things made of leather that covered his feet and feet-fingers. His upper half, with his broad shoulders and muscular arms, was clothed in a soft off-white shirt beneath a blue jacket, open, which matched the trousers.

Humans must wear clothes because their skin was so fragile and weak. The foot-fingers on Kaerius's right foot throbbed, protesting their mistreatment on the stairs. The sand in his hair and crusted on his chest felt scratchy and strange. He raised one hand and tried to run it through his golden hair, only to scowl at the sand that showered him and the tangles that caught his fingers. His skin was so soft and vulnerable beneath the film of salt and sand.

At another word from his guide, he followed the man down another hallway, where he stopped at a door.

"You'll stay here." Brighton opened the door and gestured for him to go first.

The prince swept in with all the dignity he could muster, letting the blanket around his shoulders swirl in the breeze of his entrance. The room was scarcely a quarter of the size of his anteroom in the palace, but the humans did not know he was a prince, so he did not hold the poor accommodations against them. There was a pile of cloth on a strange platform near a window, and several other large pieces of furniture which the merman did not understand.

Kaerius looked back at his guide, his eyebrows raised questioningly.

"Get dressed, and I'll take you to the kitchen," said Brighton with the barest edge of frustration in his voice.

Kaerius's brows lowered in annoyance. He let the blanket drop and looked at the pile of cloth. If it were not for the cold, he would have thought clothes utterly superfluous, for what reason would a prince have to hide any portion of his beauty? Brighton himself was hardly unlovely, Kaerius thought, and congratulated himself on his mental generosity. Humans wore clothes because of their weakness, not their lack of beauty, because they were lovely in most ways, aside from their silly, useless teeth.

"Good grief," muttered Brighton. "Here." He strode forward, pulled the pile of cloth apart, and held out a pair of trousers.

Kaerius accepted them with some trepidation. How did one put on such a garment? He shot a glance at Brighton.

"Sit down." The man crossed his arms and looked away. "Put the trousers on, then the belt, then the shirt." He pointed at each as he named it. "I'll leave you to it." He stalked out of the room and closed the door firmly behind him.

If he wouldn’t be useful, Kaerius would prefer to puzzle this mess out alone, in his own time. He sat on the flat platform and was shocked to discover that he sank into it a little. He pulled the trousers on and set the leather strap aside, not knowing what to do with it. The shirt fell over his shoulders with a pleasing smoothness and the faint hint of warmth against his skin.

Standing up felt strange and perilous. He swayed, feeling that the world was rising and falling like the swells in a heavy sea. The trousers sagged over his lean hips, and he wondered whether the leather strap might be useful in preventing that. He decided it was a problem he would address later. The floor rippled and swam, and he closed his eyes for a moment against the dizziness. Still, he made it to the door and opened it, then leaned against the doorframe. Brighton had a lantern now, and the brilliance of it in Kaerius’s eyes was nearly enough to steady him.

“Can you walk?” Brighton asked.

Kaerius nodded once, then closed his eyes against the spinning blaze of light. Was this how humans felt when they were hanging over the sides of ships? He would laugh at them a little less in the future. Chills ran up his spine, and he didn’t protest when the man gripped his arm and half-hauled him down the corridor.

Several minutes later, Kaerius was seated at a wooden table staring a plate full of unfamiliar items, having been admonished to “Eat up. It’s all I have ready now, and a bit bland, but it should hold you until tomorrow, at least.”

He poked a finger at the most promising of the items, a fish fillet, albeit weirdly hot and covered in little bits of green plant matter. The texture had changed with the application of heat, and Kaerius wondered whether he would be able to choke it down. A mushy white substance next to it held a little golden puddle of oil, and beside that, a variety of green plants clustered together, all warm and glistening. The scents were overpoweringly strong, though not exactly unpleasant.

He picked at the fish cautiously, noting how the flesh fell into tender bits, white on the inside with little green flecks all over the outside. There was no skin on it, and he wondered if humans did not like the skin. Perhaps the scales were too difficult for their dull teeth to manage. When it was cool enough not to burn his fingers, he ate cautiously, eying Brighton and the other human in the room, a woman some years older than the guard.

Flavors exploded in his mouth with eye-watering intensity, and if he'd had use of his voice, he would have exclaimed in surprise. Since he could not express his shock verbally, he examined each item with new interest and a healthy amount of caution. Perhaps he would not have enjoyed the meal with his former tastes, but his human mouth, with its foolish little teeth, was delighted by every bite. Hot food was an entirely alien experience, and once he had overcome that first surprise, he enjoyed it immensely. It was new and exciting, and the new flavors and scents made his head spin. His body needed sustenance after the exertions of the day. The mush with its golden oil was quite gloppy, and he wondered at the silliness of humans to create a food so difficult to eat with one's fingers. But the taste was rich and mild.

The meal was marred only by a bout of coughing that brought saltwater to his mouth and tears to his eyes and left him so dizzy that he stared at the food for several minutes before Brighton said, "Eat."

So he did, feeling numb and distant from the world.

"Use your spoon," Brighton said.

Kaerius didn't know what a spoon was, and the utensil had been half-hidden beneath a folded piece of white cloth, which he had not thought important. He licked his fingers clean and ignored the guard. His ears were full of far too many sounds, clinking and clacking as others in the room stacked plates and glasses, footsteps echoing behind him, the rustle of fabric, and the splash of water as someone washed dishes. The cacophony of sound was nauseating, and it made him feel that up was down and down was up. He closed his eyes and pressed his hands over his ears.

The warmth and satisfaction of the meal brought his fatigue back, along with the stupefying ache in his chest, which he had momentarily forgotten. It was all he could to do to keep breathing. His fingers tingled, and he slumped over the table, more than half asleep.

"What's wrong with him?" the woman's voice said.

"I don't know," Brighton replied quietly. "Her Royal Highness wants to see him tomorrow. Maybe he'll be a little more clear-headed in the morning."

Kaerius barely noticed when the guard hefted him to his feet and hauled him back down the corridor to the room in which he had changed clothes. The prince flopped onto the bed and watched with dazed wonder as Brighton did something at a cavity in the wall. Even the bright light of the

flames that danced around the room could not keep his eyes open, and he felt into a feverish darkness.

Chapter 9

The Mer prince woke to the feel of fingers upon the side of his throat, and he reacted without thought, wrapping his arms around the man's neck and under his arm to prevent the use of any weapon while he pulled the man closer and buried his teeth in his unprotected throat.

An explosion of sound and pain across Kaerius's ear startled him enough that he hesitated, and he realized the blood in his mouth was hot and presumably human, rather than cold.

There was a knife at his throat. He let the man go. Not because he was afraid, of course, but because he chose to.

The man pulled away, one trembling hand pressed to his throat and the other outstretched as if to keep Kaerius away from him.

"Have a care," Brighton said, the knife point pricking a sharp warning beneath Kaerius's jaw.

The prince blinked and nodded, and the guard withdrew the weapon slowly, watching his face.

"This is the royal physician, Sir Vincent, and he came at Her Royal Highness's request. You owe him gratitude, not violence." Seeing that Kaerius lay motionless, Brighton spared a quick glance for the physician. "How badly are you hurt?"

The older man looked at the blood smearing his hand and said, wincing, "I'll be all right. I suppose we can assume there has been a history of violence, whether he can speak of it or not."

"Do you have anything to say for yourself?" Brighton prompted.

Kaerius eased himself up to a sitting position, moving slowly so as not to startle these humans. He nodded once. His eyes flicked over the man's wound. It was hardly life-threatening, since Kaerius's human teeth were so small and dull and he had been half-asleep, but the bruises would no doubt be painful. He stood and gave the man the sign for a gracious apology, fully aware that neither human would understand but knowing it was warranted.

He had not intended to harm anyone who did not mean violence to him. Then, feeling magnanimous, he added the sign for gratitude.

"What does that mean?" asked Vincent. "Do you know if he has always been mute?"

Kaerius's eyes narrowed. There was no reason to speak of him as if he were not standing *right there*, able to answer with intelligence, if not words. He shook his head, only a little ashamed at the physician's slight flinch.

Still, he ought not frighten the man. Clearly Vincent was no warrior. Kaerius spread his hands wide in what he imagined was an unthreatening posture.

"Her Royal Highness will see you when you're well enough to walk unaided, and I see that you are much recovered," said Brighton.

Vincent took a deep breath, steadying himself. "I'm trying to help you. Do you understand that?"

Kaerius nodded.

"May I feel your pulse? That's what I was attempting when you woke. It won't hurt."

Kaerius nodded again, but he could not help a suppressed shudder when the physician put two fingers against the hollow beneath his jaw. The man's gaze grew distant as he concentrated. The prince's eyes flicked around the room and back to the older man. Sir Vincent was not truly a threat, but the feel of fingers on Kaerius's throat, of *anything* against that vulnerability, was enough to make his skin crawl.

With stiff dignity, the prince submitted to an impressively thorough examination, from the rapidly swelling lump on the side of his head to the bruised fingers on the end of his feet. Finally Sir Vincent said, "He's a bit feverish, but he seems clear-headed enough, now that he's awake. I think the shock of near-drowning and then nearly freezing to death temporarily weakened him. I imagine he'll be back to himself in a few days, although whether that will bring his speech back, I cannot say. I don't think you've damaged him too much on the head, though I imagine he has a ferocious headache."

Kaerius shrugged. The throbbing in his head had settled in, as if it meant to stay for a while, but he'd survived far worse. A headache was certainly preferable to having accidentally killed someone who had intended no harm to him.

"Were you lost off a ship? I am not aware of any recent losses."

Kaerius shook his head.

The guard said, “Do you know what’s wrong with your voice?”

The prince nodded. *Wrong* was a strong word, for he’d always had a particularly lovely voice for singing. But it was gone, and he supposed that could be considered something wrong. A temporary problem.

“Is it something we could help with?” Sir Vincent asked.

The sudden, bright smile that crossed Kaerius’s face startled the two humans, for the Mer prince was dangerously beautiful. He felt an unexpected rush of warmth toward these two men. They had been nothing but kind to him, aside from a justified blow to the head, though he must have seemed strange and perhaps dangerous to them. He gave them the gratitude sign again, fully aware that they would not understand the nuances of it, shaped as it was by his status and privilege, but desiring to be generous. He shook his head.

Brighton’s face softened, his eyes kind. “Her Royal Highness said she would see you this morning. Before you see her, you need to get cleaned up.”

The prince looked down at his shirt, seeing nothing wrong. He’d even managed to figure out the little round things that went in corresponding little holes and had gotten the two sides of the shirt even.

“A bath,” prompted the guard. “Come on.”

Sir Vincent departed down the hallway, and Brighton led Kaerius in the opposite direction to a spacious room with a fireplace and a large basin of water. “It’s already hot. There’s soap and a towel and clean clothes there.” The guard pointed to a wooden bench to one side of the basin. “I’ll be in the hall when you’re done.”

Kaerius strode to the bench, pleased with the smooth strength of his steps. He was already steadier on his feet, and he thought triumphantly that in another few days, he would have gained the respect and admiration he deserved here in the human world.

The small, rectangular lump that Brighton had called “soap” smelled odd. Kaerius knew very little of land plants, and this was a sweet, floral sort of smell. He licked it.

“What did you do that for?” Brighton exclaimed.

Kaerius gagged and coughed, his eyes watering. He held the soap out away from his body as if the horrid taste would attack him.

“It’s soap! You wash with it! You don’t eat it,” the guard groaned. “Were you raised by wolves?”

The prince gave him a hard look, and, disgruntled and thoroughly disgusted by the taste that filled his mouth and throat, waved a hand through the air in a swimming motion to indicate a Mer tail.

“What?” Brighton frowned at him, then said in jest, “You were raised by fish?”

Kaerius stared at him and nodded once.

“It was a joke. Get cleaned up. The princess shouldn’t have to wait for you to figure out soap tastes bad.” Brighton’s voice had a frustrated edge, and he turned toward the door. “Soap every inch and rinse well. Don’t take forever.”

Kaerius sighed.

He bathed quickly, trying to ignore the soap taste that would not fade. If soap was meant for washing, he used it correctly, washing every sand-crusted crevice and salt-stiff strand of hair. When he stepped from the water again, having rinsed as well as he could, it was the least-salty he had ever been.

The whole experience was disorienting; the basin was so small he could not stretch out both arms and legs at the same time, and when he stood up, the water came only just over his knees. What a strange, sad little puddle of water!

Still, his human body had enjoyed the warmth. He shivered in the cold air as he dried; he felt that this human body should go into his new clean clothes dry rather than wet. When he stepped into the hallway, Brighton turned to him with a relieved look. “Oh, good. You’re decent. Tuck in your shirt.”

Kaerius raised one questioning eyebrow, and the man reached forward and began to do it for him. The prince raised his arms out of the way, letting himself be turned out as the humans thought appropriate. Brighton tucked the prince’s shirt into his trousers and straightened the cloth over the prince’s broad shoulders. He straightened the prince’s cuffs and collar, then stepped back. “Are shirts new to you?” he muttered.

The prince nodded his head, amused at the man’s startled look. He *had* attempted to communicate this. It wasn’t his fault the guard had thought he was joking.

“Really?” Brighton frowned thoughtfully. “Hm.” He produced a comb from his pocket and handed it to the prince.

Though the design of the comb was different than Kaerius had seen before, the concept was not unfamiliar to him, and he combed his hair without protest. It took some time, for his hair was thoroughly tangled and came down to his shoulders, but he did not hurry. He wanted to be pleasing to the princess. He was then presented with things called socks and boots, which befuddled him for a moment before the guard said, “Put them on your feet.”

At last, Brighton led the way down the hall. “Her Royal Highness is not obligated to see you at all; she does so out of the goodness of her heart. I’m sure you understand that if you offer her any violence, your life is forfeit in the most unpleasant way you care to imagine.”

Kaerius thought, with a grim smile, that the guard severely underestimated Kaerius’s imagination if he thought humans could match the threat of the Lord of the Deep. But he made the sign for acknowledgment and agreement, as if it would be understood.

He followed Brighton up another flight of stairs. Then another.

By the top of the third flight, Kaerius’s blood was pounding in his ears, and his leg muscles burned. The boots felt heavy and unwieldy on his unfamiliar feet, and he found it even more difficult to walk in these strange coverings than he had barefoot. He flared his nostrils and kept his breathing steady; no human would see him struggling at something so mundane as climbing stairs, now that he was at least somewhat recovered. Then, partway up the next flight of stairs, he doubled over and coughed until the world spun. His chest felt like the entire ocean was crushing him, and he tasted saltwater as he gasped for breath afterwards.

He felt absolutely wretched.

Brighton eyed him with what Kaerius took to be concern, and the prince straightened his shoulders and persevered.

Much to his relief, at the top of the fourth flight of stairs they turned down a short hall, passed through a door, and then entered a larger room with a vaulted stone ceiling and enormous windows that looked out over a valley below. Cool sunlight spilled over the stone floor and mingled with the dust motes dancing in the air. Far, far in the distance green hills lurked behind a haze of fog. At the opposite end of the room, the princess sat in one of two golden chairs upon a dais.

“Bow,” prompted Brighton.

Kaerius shot him a glance, and when the guard bowed, Kaerius imitated this gesture. Then, without waiting for permission from Brighton, the prince strode up the long green carpet towards the princess with his shoulders back and his head high.

“I see you are alive and well,” said the princess.

The prince drank her in with new appreciation. She was lovely indeed, with her hair the color of shadows. Her dress was a deep blue that set off her golden skin, smooth and soft, and her dark hair fell in waves over one shoulder.

“Can you talk yet?” asked the princess.

Kaerius shook his head once, his eyes fixed upon her face. It would be easier to woo her if he could speak, of course, but he was not entirely without ideas that did not require singing. He signed *I am Kaerius, Prince of the Northern Mer, and I have come to honor you with my hand in marriage. After a brief courtship, you will understand that I am not only beautiful, but strong, intelligent, fierce, and honorable, and you will adore me as I have adored you.*

The princess bit her lip in an expression of confusion that Kaerius found unexpectedly charming. He had known she was beautiful, but he had not expected her to be so endearing.

I understand this must seem precipitous to you. As a start, I would be honored to eat the next meal with you. She would not understand any of his introduction, of course, but it was an appropriate thing to say, and the intricate signs would at least convey that he was not entirely stupid.

“What does that mean?” The princess’s eyes flicked to Brighton, who had followed the prince closer.

“I don’t know,” the guard said.

With an elegant flutter of his fingers, Kaerius offered his name sign, fully aware that they would not understand that either, but feeling obligated to abide by courtesy anyway.

“What is your name?” asked the princess gently.

Kaerius smiled as he repeated the gesture. Perhaps this was the beginning of understanding between them.

The princess blinked, and then said, “Is that the same motion you did before? Were you telling me your name?”

Kaerius beamed and nodded.

“My name is Marin,” the princess said. “Is there a sign for that?”

The prince tilted his head. The name was not used among the Mer folk, but the sounds were not strange to his ear. He combined the sound signs for her and added the honorific for royalty.

“That’s lovely.” She studied him. “How long have you been mute?”

He held up two fingers, presuming that counting was done approximately the same above the water as below.

“Two years?”

He shook his head.

“Two months?”

Another head shake.

“Two days?”

Yes.

She stared at him. “But your signs are far too advanced to have been mute so short a time. Do you come from a people who are often mute?”

He shook his head and signed *We often use signs when hunting, and it is considered good manners to be able to converse fluently on any topic without creating unnecessary sound*. Then, with a feeling of futility, he added *Do you remember me? We’ve met before.*

The princess made a passable attempt at his name sign, and his heart constricted a little within him. What was that feeling? Of course she didn’t remember; he had not expected her to. He shoved the sudden tightness to the back of his mind and stepped forward to reach for her hands.

A moment later, he was sprawled on the stone steps looking up the length of Brighton’s gleaming sword.

“Don’t touch the princess,” the guard said with no traces of his former friendliness.

The sharp point of the sword pricked Kaerius’s throat.

“Brighton,” said Marin. “I don’t think he means any harm.”

Kaerius raised a challenging eyebrow at the guard and smiled slowly. His rival would not be able to keep him away from the princess.

“And you, respect my guard,” Marin said with an edge of anger.

The prince’s smirk deepened. He signed, *Of course. Still, do you not think me much prettier than him?*

“What does that mean?” asked Brighton suspiciously. He reached down with one strong hand and hauled the prince upright and several feet farther away from the princess.

Kaerius laughed to himself. Even without words, he would triumph sooner or later.

The princess steepled her fingers under her chin. “The Boravian delegation arrives tomorrow afternoon,” she said quietly. “I wonder if our mute friend here can help me with that little issue.”

The prince grinned roguishly and twitched an eyebrow upward. *How might I be of service? I am eager to delight you*.

“Your Highness,” Brighton said, and then he stopped.

She frowned. “Ralph knows everyone else at court, so it must be him, if it is anyone.”

What is the problem from which I might save you, Your Highness?

Marin’s expression grew even more serious. “I will tell you the problem that faces me, and then you may decide if you are willing to get embroiled in this little mess.”

The prince’s broad shoulders stiffened with pride. What danger would dare confront this princess, as if she were not already under his protection? He bared his teeth in a dangerous smile.

“Tomorrow, we host the visiting Boravian delegation at a ball. Two days later, the Severtian delegation. After that, the Frintan, and then the Grestarian. My father’s health has become increasingly precarious, and our neighbors see Eleria as vulnerable. All of these nations have reason to want to ally themselves with us, if not outright invade us. Boravia is most dangerous, but Severt is also a real threat. Frinta wishes to establish an alliance against Boravia, and Gresta wants access to our port.

“I have come to terms with the fact that I will have to wed some foreign nobleman. It is more advantageous at the moment not to elevate one of our own noble families over the others; there is far too much fighting and intrigue as it is. However, I would like to put it off as long as possible so that I may select the least objectionable of the men who would victimize my nation.” Her voice was thick with grief and frustration.

Kaerius’s frown deepened. *Do you fear an invasion?*

The princess sighed. “I don’t know what you mean. I’m sorry.”

Kaerius shrugged out of Brighton’s grip and strode to the windows. He placed his fingertips against the glass in wonder before looking out across the verdant valley beyond. Only a short distance away, the cliffside fell away in a magnificent jumble of sharp-edged peaks through which narrow paths wove like glittering threads. The windows faced east and slightly

south, and at this time of morning, the light made warm golden stripes on the marble floor.

The prince pointed to the distant mountains and looked inquiringly at the princess.

“Those are our lands. If Boravia, Severt, or Gresta invaded, the invasion would come from farther south.” The princess pointed off to one side.

He walked the fingers of one hand over the palm of the other, indicating walking, and then made the sign for waves.

“Invasion by land or by sea? Both, I expect, although the mountain pass will be much easier to defend than the beaches.”

Kaerius nodded and smiled, his eyes glinting dangerously. *Marry me, and invasion by sea would never be a concern*.

The princess held his gaze for a moment. “It is hardly just to put you in danger when you so recently escaped death. But if you are willing, what I would ask of you is this: Act as my escort to the ball tomorrow. Pretend to be my suitor. If I appear to have a suitor already, Boravia and Severt, the most aggressive of the threats, will be honor-bound to pretend to court me.

“In allowing myself to be courted, I hope to wrest some concessions from them in the treaty that follows. I will likely have to wed one of them. If we can make them believe I have a real choice, perhaps the chains I will eventually wear will be a little lighter.”

Kaerius found his mischievous smile fading. She sounded resigned and resolute rather than distraught, but there was an edge of hidden grief in her voice that caught at his heart.

Let me show you a better option. He gestured at himself and raised his chin, letting his undeniable beauty speak for itself.

Brighton huffed softly from just behind his shoulder. “Don’t get any ideas. You owe Her Majesty your life. She has the right to use you as she wishes, and you will take no liberties with her person or with her heart.”

“I don’t think there is much danger in it,” said Marin. “This is a delaying tactic, and I am sure they will guess that soon enough. But I hope it will buy me a little time to make a wiser decision and protect my nation.”

What of your father the king? Isn’t he responsible for protecting the nation? The thought occurred to Kaerius a little belatedly. He did not expect her to understand his signs, so he was not disappointed when her next words did not answer his question. Still, it seemed to him that a king, or any

man, ought to protect his daughter, and it troubled him that Marin seemed to feel herself without this safety.

The princess met his eyes, and for a moment he felt that she saw through his sparkling beauty and confidence to his hope and fear and uncertainty. “Will you play the part of my suitor? It is only for a short time, and I will, of course, ensure that you are compensated appropriately.”

It will not be a false courtship, Your Highness, but yes, I will be delighted to oppose these foreign suitors.

“Was that a yes?” Marin held his gaze as if she wanted to be entirely sure they understood each other.

Yes, Your Highness. He nodded and bowed deeply. When he straightened, the world dimmed for a moment, and he blinked, feeling strangely dizzy and sick. He swallowed and smiled, a little pale.

“What shall I call you, then? I ought to be able to use an audible name. Can you write?”

The prince looked at her blankly.

“What sound does your name start with?” She went through the letters one by one, and Kaerius nodded at the K. “What’s next?”

Brighton said quietly, “I can do this. I’m sure you have more important things.”

Marin sighed and looked down. “But I don’t want to,” she muttered. “I suppose it is a better use of our time to tell you about the delegations that are arriving, and what I hope you can do. It would be a great service to me, and I will, of course, pay you for your time.”

The guard’s frown deepened.

The princess said, “For now, I will call you Kai, if that is acceptable. Where are you from?”

Kaerius pointed out across the water.

“I don’t know of any lands that direction.”

I live in the water, not across it. He made a swimming motion with his hands.

She looked confused, and Kaerius found her befuddled look unexpectedly adorable.

“You came out of the water? I know; I’ll tell them you’re a foreign prince from a far off land, and you don’t speak our language yet. Do you know how to dance?”

The gravity of the world above water was challenging enough. Kaerius tried to imagine attempting anything like a dance when limited to sideways movement alone and frowned. What about movement up and down? What about the graceful changes of direction, from heads to tails uppermost and around again, and the triumphant flips and turns that characterized the dance of the Mer?

He tilted his head doubtfully. He was an excellent dancer, but he suspected his skill and grace in the water was not what she meant.

“Why him, if I might be so bold, Your Highness?” asked Brighton quietly.

“Look at him.” The princess gestured. “He can pull it off. He carries himself like a prince, even mute and wearing borrowed clothes. He can’t be startled into some accidental comment that Ralph will use against me. No one knows him, so they can’t prove he’s not from far away. Being a foreign prince would explain his unfamiliarity with our customs. Do you have a specific objection to him, or just to the plan in general?”

Brighton sighed. “He’ll embarrass you, Your Highness. He *licked the soap* this morning! Can I really not serve as escort? Or I can find you one of the young lords from the barracks no one has seen.”

“I want you watching my back, please. I trust you most.” She smiled affectionately at him, and he bowed. “As for the young lords, I’ve seen them all, and I know that as proud and patriotic and eager to serve as they are, they’ll look at me with awe as their princess. Do you see any awe in Kai?” The princess gestured at him, and Kaerius turned his most regal smile upon the guard. Only a tiny quirk of his lips betrayed his amusement.

Brighton’s sharp eyes flicked up and down the prince’s lean figure, apparently taking in every detail of his body and bearing. The prince had seen no one else with coloring like his, and he imagined his s mop of golden waves and blue-green eyes did look foreign. His strong, sensitive lips and sharp jaw looked as regal as any prince might have wished, at least among the Mer. His shoulders were broad, his arms muscular, and his hands moved with elegant grace that looked good on anyone, human or Mer. Kaerius raised his chin as he held Brighton’s gaze.

The guard pressed his lips together. “He’s certainly pretty enough to be a prince,” he said reluctantly. “And I see no reason to think he would intentionally harm or endanger you. He owes you his life and current comfort.”

Kaerius looked back at the princess, and he smiled just a little at this, his expression sweet and delighted, so that she might see his admiration and intentions. He was not awed. He was entranced.

“I still wish we could buy you a little time some other way,” said the guard. “But I cannot think of how, other than delaying the balls and pretending you are indisposed.”

“Oh, I can be indisposed all right,” said the princess. “But I need to see Ralph and Galbraith, at least, without having to be dancing with them at the time. Everyone else will expect something from me.” Her pale hazel eyes rested on Kaerius gravely. “I need you to understand that I owe you nothing else, other than the payment I promised and my gratitude.”

Kaerius bowed deeply, imitating Brighton’s grace. *I am eager to serve Your Royal Highness. But I do believe you will love me by the end. I am irresistible*. He grinned at her, his eyes sparkling with teasing humor. *Even Brighton says I’m pretty.*

“I ought to be able to sign your name, even if I must use a short form for now. Will you teach me?”

He signed it for her, and then, when she got the left hand’s position wrong on the first part, he shot a reassuring look at Brighton and stepped forward.

“Wait here,” said Brighton, putting a hand on his shoulder.

The princess rose, descended the steps, and then, at last, stood before him. Apparently it suited protocol for a royal to descend to the floor, but not for a presumed commoner to ascend too near the throne.

When she reached him, Kaerius couldn’t help his slow smile, for it was an entirely honest response to being face to face with the princess he had so often admired from afar. The light of intelligence, kindness, and determination in her eyes elevated her from merely beautiful in form to beautiful in spirit as well, and his heart thundered within him.

Conscious of the guard’s watchful eye, he signed his name again more slowly, watching for the nuances in her imitation. Slowly, so as not to provoke Brighton, he reached out to correct the position of her left hand and spread the fingers a little more.

Her skin was warm and smooth, with faint calluses on the tips of her fingers. What had caused that? The sensation of her skin on his sent fiery desire through him, but he gave no sign of it. It was too early; she had not loved him from a distance as he had loved her.

Well, love was a strong word. He had no real experience of love. But he had desired her, and now she was here, nearly in his arms, and he did not want to frighten her. So he kept his touch upon her hands light and respectful, and he stepped back immediately when she signed his name correctly.

He pointed at her in the polite way, with two fingers. *Your Royal Highness Marin,* he signed.

"Is that my name?" she asked.

He nodded and did the sign more slowly, watching her imitate the movements. Her hands were graceful, and that pleased him more than he had expected.

"What is the sign for Brighton's name?" she asked.

The name was not used under the water, but Kaerius signed *Bright Man,* which would suffice. He looked at Brighton to see that the guard was watching intently.

"You ought to be able to ask for food and water," Brighton said quietly. "He hasn't eaten this morning, other than a taste of soap, and he's probably thirsty. Let's use these for food and drink, since they'll be more easily understood by the servants if I'm not around." He pantomimed eating with a utensil and drinking from a cup.

Kaerius frowned in confusion, for these signs made very little sense to him. He had drunk water from a cup the previous night, so he figured that one out with a moment of thought, but he had eaten with his fingers. Nevertheless, he would remember the signs; he had a quick mind and was eager to communicate with these people.

And dancing? I know how we dance in the water, but I cannot imagine what you do here.

The princess bit her lip. "I don't know what you mean," she said apologetically. "What else will he need to know, Brighton?"

It irked Kaerius that the princess spoke so easily to the guard, as if they had been friends for many years. *He* wanted to be spoken to as if they had been friends for many years. *He* wanted to be a trusted confidant.

"How to dance," said the guard. "Table manners. He learned how to bow just now. Being foreign will help smooth over any minor blunders, I should hope."

"Thank you for your support, Brighton." The princess smiled at him, and Kaerius wished that smile were for him. Then she turned the same

sweet smile to him, and his heart pounded like waves in a storm. “You might as well sit down. You’re probably still tired after your ordeal.” She ascended to the top step and sat, gesturing for him to sit near her.

Brighton’s eyes widened, but he didn’t protest.

Kaerius settled one step below her and a little to her left, then turned and leaned back on his hands with his legs stretched out. The posture was one he had seen humans assume on the beaches in the summer months, and it seemed a fitting gesture to indicate that he thought her bright and lovely and warm like the sun. Besides, he was also quite tired, and his legs felt strange and gangly. Gravity was so very bothersome here in the air, pulling him down with such inexorable heaviness. He did not like feeling constrained to horizontal movement alone.

Brighton eyed him disapprovingly and said, “Sit up straight. You’re being disrespectful.”

The prince blinked and looked at Marin. The princess looked vaguely confused, though not exactly offended, and pressed her lips together in an expression Kaerius could not read. He straightened and put one foot on the step below him so he could turn and see her more easily. How much easier things would be if they knew he really was a prince! But he could not tell them, and if he conveyed it through pantomime, they would probably not understand or believe him. Still, he was a royal suitor, not a common sham suitor. Nevertheless, while his station was the equal of hers, he had no wish to insult or disrespect her, and these human customs were foreign. *I meant only to show my admiration for you, Your Highness. Please forgive any discourtesy; it was entirely unintentional.*

He smiled up at her, admiring how the light caught her dark hair and the smooth curve of her cheek. She wore a fine gold band on her head, and it glittered with tiny clear stones cut to catch the light.

Marin smoothed her dress over her legs and frowned thoughtfully. “You haven’t eaten breakfast?”

Kaerius shook his head and gave an elegant half-shrug. No prince of the Mer, no warrior, would complain about missing a meal. Courage was practiced in small moments as well as great conflicts, and he had a great deal of courage, if not much humility to go along with it.

“Brighton, if you would be so kind? It’s nearly time for tea anyway. Please do join us.” She smiled at the guard again.

Kaerius let the feeling of jealousy give a sharp edge to his smile.

Brighton strode away, apparently no longer concerned about the princess's physical safety with him. At the door, he spoke to a servant for a moment and then returned.

Kaerius took the opportunity to sign *Who is he to you?* For it was now reasonably clear to him that Marin did not intend to marry Brighton, however much affection and trust might be between them.

"What?" she asked. "What about Brighton?"

He indicated the two of them in a questioning way.

"He's the head of my personal guard detail and a good friend." Marin smiled. "He's also a cousin on my mother's side. He came to serve here in the palace when I was only a child, and he was not much older. I trust him implicitly, and I have never been disappointed."

The guard's features softened at these affectionate words. "Her Royal Highness also introduced me to my wife some years ago, so not only do I love her for her own character, I owe her a great debt for my current happiness."

Kaerius stared at the man. *You're married?* The Merfolk wore a tiny gold ring in their left ear when they were married, and Brighton had no such earring. How did humans indicate their eligibility or commitment?

At this moment, the door at the other end of the room opened. A servant bowed and then strode forward carrying a small table, followed by another servant carrying a heavily laden tray.

The princess waited in silence until the servants exited the room and closed the door behind them again.

She said, "Brighton, if I might prevail upon your generosity and that of your wife, perhaps you two might teach him the dances he needs for tomorrow."

Brighton nodded and handed the princess a little cup of fragrant brown liquid and then a plate with a selection of unfamiliar things on it. The dishes were also new to Kaerius, and he studied the remaining plates and cups on the tray with interest.

"Have you ever had tea before?" Marin asked.

Kaerius glanced at her, unsure what she meant, and she lifted her cup a little. He shook his head.

"This is a breakfast tea, from the south. Hold the cup like so and take small sips."

The scent of the tea tickled Kaerius's nose, and he inhaled the unfamiliar notes. The porcelain of the cup felt fragile in his hands. He took a sip. The very act of drinking from a cup was strange; the liquid was so contained and tame, so separate from the world. Not to mention that it was hot!

"Do you know these other foods?" Marin watched him curiously.

He shook his head.

"This is an apple tart flavored with cinnamon. This is goat cheese with apricots in it, and this is a sharp cheese called glince. I like it on plain sourdough with a little bit of fig preserves." She indicated a small pot of dark brown sludge with tiny speckles in it.

He watched as the princess spread a bit of the preserves on the bread, topped it with a thin slice of glince, and took a delicate bite. When he did the same, the taste sensations that exploded in his mouth nearly made him choke.

"Are you all right?" asked Marin in concern. "You look pale."

Kaerius nodded, but his head swam, and he felt a strange, sticky sensation under his arms and and across his shoulders. Sweat? What a disgusting human weakness! The room seemed to undulate before him, and he closed his eyes and opened them again. His breath came short and fast.

Brighton gripped his shoulder with one strong hand, a steady rock that helped the prince regain a sense of stability, though the world still wavered a little. "You don't feel feverish. Are you allergic to something?"

The prince swallowed and forced a shaky smile. *I'm all right. Everything is new, and I didn't expect the bite to feel like birdsong and sunlight and make my head spin.* Then, with a recklessness born of knowing he would not be understood, he added, *I do not have to pretend to be noble, Your Highness, but pretending to be human is more difficult than I had anticipated.*

Marin said, "I did not realize you were still suffering from your ordeal. I will ask Brighton to select one of his men to escort me so you can recover more fully."

No! Kaerius sucked in a startled breath and met her gaze, his own eyes wide with dismay. *I would be honored to escort you, Your Highness. It would grieve me deeply if I could not serve you in this way, for multiple reasons.* He bowed deeply, and, with a boldness that startled both the princess and Brighton, bowed in the human way over her hand. He pressed

his forehead to the back of her hand in the Mer gesture of devotion to a loved one, head bowed and eyes closed.

She pulled away, just a little, and he looked up, his expression open and sincere.

The princess swallowed and pressed her pale lips together. “Do you… do you not want me to choose another?”

Kaerius shook his head emphatically. He let her hand go as she pulled away again, savoring every moment of the touch of her hand on his. Her skin was so warm that desire flashed through him, and her compassion seemed so generous and so lovely that admiration made his heart beat faster and harder.

She shared a glance with Brighton for a moment. “If you are sure you are recovered,” she said finally, “I would appreciate your assistance. Do rest tonight, and see the physician again if you feel ill.”

Kaerius’s mouth felt sticky with the lingering taste of the cheese and fruit preserves and bread. His body felt simultaneously hot and chilled, and gravity pulled at him so heavily. He took a sip of tea and found it too flavorful, but at least a little steadying. He closed his eyes for a moment to regain his composure. His senses were merely temporarily overwhelmed; he was not actually ill or injured.

When he was able to meet the princess’s gaze again, he found her watching him with concern. He managed a roguish smile, and when his lips trembled a little, he hoped fervently that the princess either did not see it, or did not think less of him for it.

“If you are sure,” said the princess again. “The delegation arriving tomorrow is from Boravia, to the south. It is headed by Lord Hugh Ralph, cousin to the king His Majesty Bruce Ralph. He is likely to be named heir to the king, too; His Majesty has no natural children, and his only brother died years ago with no heirs. Lord Ralph is reputed to be prideful and a man with a quick temper, neither of which I find remotely appealing. Still, he is not entirely without virtue; I have heard he pays his servants well and is generous with his wealth. Of course there are the obvious benefits of having a connection to the Boravian throne both in preventing an outright invasion from Boravia and in opposing Severt.”

Kaerius nodded and took another sip of tea, his gaze fixed on the princess. *What does he look like?*

These signs must have been reasonably clear even to humans, because Marin responded, “He’s tall, dark, and handsome enough, I suppose. I’ve been told he’s a good swordsman and rider, accomplished at everything a nobleman ought to be.” She looked at him thoughtfully, studying his face. “He will probably be polite to you, especially if he believes you to be royal. He will likely want to show himself to be a good match, to bolster his own pride and that of his nation, so he will bring small gifts to woo me, as if he wants me for myself rather than my kingdom.

“If I dance with him twice in a row, or more than thrice in the evening, by Boravian custom I have consented to a formal courtship and spurned other offers. Of course, he knows our customs are different, but he will seek to advance his suit by any means possible. I do not wish to be pushed into the unpleasant situation of violating his customs and tweaking his pride in order to gain a little time.

“There will be others in his delegation; I have met some of them, but I am sure there will be some I do not know. Eat something, please, or I will think you too ill to escort me tomorrow.” Marin smiled.

Kaerius swallowed, unwilling to be so disoriented in front of her again. A little hunger was of no consequence, but another blow to his pride might begin to teach him humility, and he had no desire to learn that.

“This is honeydew melon. It’s a fruit, rather strong. These are candied plums, and these are starfruit and dragonfruit. Dragonfruit is quite mild. The cream pastries are also delicately flavored.” The princess eyed him over the rim of her teacup. “What did you eat, where you are from?”

He made a swimming motion with his hand.

“Fish?”

He nodded.

“What else?” She smiled encouragingly at him, and it provoked a strange tightness in his chest, a desire to see her smile again.

He made the sign for squid, but she didn’t understand. *Crabs. Lobster. Shrimp. Shark. Gulls, sometimes. Sometimes kelp and moss, occasionally urchins. Mostly fish.*

“Try the dragonfruit first,” she suggested.

The humans used the spiky piece of metal to stab the fruit, so Kaerius did the same. He stabbed a piece of fruit and popped it in his mouth.

It was indeed mild, like a sweet bit of trout, and he smiled gratefully at the princess.

“Do you like it?” she asked.

He nodded.

The princess told him a little more about the Boravian delegation and the others that would come in the following days while they finished. Kaerius tried the bread alone, with no fig spread on it, and found it palatable, though with a strange texture like that of a sponge at first, until it dissolved into sludge between his strange, flat, human teeth. The tiny nibble of cheese he attempted was still overpowering, but he managed to keep his reaction to a wrinkling of his nose. If he would be here for a month or more, he would need to find a few things he could eat.

Finally the princess said, “I am glad to see you looking better.” Then she looked to Brighton, who stood and motioned Kaerius to do the same.

“I will bring him tomorrow at four, Your Highness,” said the guard, with a bow.

“Thank you.” Her kind smile encompassed them both.

The prince bowed deeply to her, as Brighton had, and then knelt to catch her hand in his and press it to his forehead again. It was an extravagant gesture, especially since he was royalty himself, but he felt that a little extravagance was warranted, since he could not express himself with words.

Then, having expressed his devotion as clearly as he knew how, he lifted his face. Ever so gently he flicked out his tongue and licked the back of her hand.

She jerked away with such violence that he flinched in remorse. “What was *that*?” she cried.

I intended no offense, he signed earnestly. *It is done among my people between new friends, to learn each other’s scents and tastes.* He held out one hand palm upward, for her to taste him.

Brighton said, “I didn’t see what he did, Your Highness. You’re not hurt, are you?” He stood close with one heavy hand on Kaerius’s shoulder to throw him to the floor if necessary.

“No.” The princess wiped her hands together, as if to wipe away the feel of Kaerius’s touch. “I think he *licked* me! Just a little, like a taste. I’m not hurt.”

Brighton rounded on him ferociously. “You can’t just go around *licking people*! That’s disgusting!”

Kaerius swallowed and bowed his head, feeling more out of his depth than before. It was one thing to be undone by unfamiliar foods and cold and the relentless pull of gravity. It was entirely another to find that his respectful gesture of affection and friendship was so utterly misconstrued.

“Why would you lick me?” Marin’s voice shook.

The prince looked up to meet her eyes, hoping she could see the remorse in them. *I wanted to claim you as friend, and I would be honored if you claimed me as friend in the same way. It is not disgusting among my people; I had no idea you would take it so. I am sorry, Your Highness. I do not wish to displease you.* His broad shoulders slumped a little.

“I didn’t really understand that,” Marin said in a steadier tone. “But I take it you were apologizing?”

He nodded.

“You didn’t mean to offend me, I assume?”

He shook his head.

“Is that… is that a normal gesture among your people?” she ventured.

He nodded again and offered his own arm, to indicate that the gesture was expected to be reciprocal.

“No, thank you,” she said in a strange, tight voice. Her lips twitched. “I’m not in the habit of licking new acquaintances.” She swallowed and cleared her throat. “You can’t lick people, Kai. It might be normal where you are from, but it isn’t normal here, and people will take offense.”

He nodded, feeling more miserable by the second. *I am sorry, Your Highness.*

Marin took a deep breath and let it out. “All right. All is forgiven. I will see you tomorrow.”

Brighton bowed, and only now did Kaerius stand. He bowed more deeply, offering a sign of gratitude. *Your kindness is more beautiful than I imagined, Your Highness*.

“Come on,” muttered Brighton.

The guard led him briskly through hallways and down stairwells, across a great open courtyard bright with winter sunlight, and finally into the street. Kaerius’s legs burned with the strange exertion, and his breaths felt too fast and unsteady in his aching lungs.

There was an odd sense of height, and it took the Mer prince a moment to understand this strange feeling. Something about the breeze, the way the sounds came from below, and the sense of open space were unfamiliar to

him. He was accustomed to the space of water, the familiar pressure full of life, of songs from distant whales that vibrated his bones, of the faint whisper of swells above his head, and of the little nonsense from shrimps and urchins and starfish. This strange emptiness, with the wind in his hair and distant birdsong, was not entirely unknown, but he had not spent much time with his face in the air, and the expanse that spread out above him and before him was even more remarkable for having spent the last day indoors.

Kaerius crossed the street to the stone wall on the other side. There was no traffic on the street; it was within the palace compound and used only for those making deliveries to the upper levels of the sprawling structure.

The wall separating the road from the precipice was as high as his elbows, and he leaned on it for a moment, grateful for the support. The icy breeze cut through his shirt, and he shivered. On the other side of the wall, the cliff dropped away a hundred feet or more, and at the bottom was a pale arc of sand, the beach upon which Marin had found him.

The guard stopped some distance away. “Are you all right?” he said quietly.

Kaerius looked at him, then back down at the beach. He sagged against the wall, letting the cold of the stones reach deep. His breathing slowed, and he imagined the ache in his chest as the reassuring pressure of the ocean depths.

“Do you know where we are?”

The prince turned to look up the street, which followed the cliff still further upward to the elegant spire of the mountain palace above their heads. Across the street was the door through which they had emerged, and it was part of the same structure, a huge rambling palace built in many increments over many years, in several styles which did not entirely match. Glass windows gleamed in the sunlight, reflecting the snowy clouds scudding across the blue sky. It seemed a wondrous place to Kaerius, who gazed at it in fascination. When he had seen this part of it before, he had been so dazed with cold and near-drowning that he had not noticed many details of this strange human construction.

“That door up there is where we found you last night,” said Brighton. “From this vantage point, can you tell me where you are from?”

Kaerius pointed out at the distant green swells.

“There is no land out there, Kai,” said Brighton, with long-suffering patience. “Do you mean to say you live in the water?”

Kaerius nodded. He turned to look at the street as it wound down the hill. Scrubby little trees sprang up from between the houses and buildings lower down the hillside, and in the bright, cold sunlight, the stones gleamed white and gray. He ran his hand along the top of the stone wall, noting the gritty mortar in the seams between the stones. The wind blew his hair in his face, a pale gold mess of tangles.

The guard sighed softly. “Come on, then. I’ve got a coat you can borrow, and in the morning we’ll find you some clothes for the reception. For now, let’s teach you how to dance and eat like a prince.”

I am a prince, signed Kaerius, but he did not expect to be understood. He straightened his shoulders and followed the guard down the hill.

By the time they reached the bottom, Kaerius’s legs were trembling with fatigue. When Brighton set off down a wide street that jutted off the main avenue, he sighed and followed. The guard slowed his steps. “How are you holding up?”

Kaerius looked at him in blank confusion.

“My house is not far. How are you feeling?”

Kaerius smiled with all the regal pride he could muster.

Only a few minutes later, Brighton said, “Here we are.” He stopped at a gate, which he unlocked with a key he pulled from one pocket. “This is the garden. In the summer it’s the most delightful enclave, but there’s not much to see now. Do you have a garden at home?”

The prince tilted his head. *Of a sort, though I think it is very different. We tend the coral reefs and kelp forests.* He followed the guard through the garden, looking about with interest at the evergreen bushes and dormant flower beds, trying to imagine what it would look like in the summer. What would make it delightful for a human? Did little schools of seahorses come through and have their babies under the bushes? Did urchins climb the trees and dance upon the branches in the summer breezes? What sort of land and air creatures would bring life to this space?

He tripped on the edge of a stone and barely caught himself before he fell headlong. The boots made the unfamiliar act of walking even more difficult.

Brighton opened the door to a spacious house with another key, and called, “My love! I’m here with a guest for the night.”

From a distant room, Kaerius heard a female voice, and then the woman emerged from a room farther down the hall.

“Hello,” she said. She had dark hair with a hint of red in it, and a ready smile. She strode closer with long, easy steps.

Kaerius bowed to her, and Brighton huffed a quiet laugh. “We only bow to the princess. Lila, this is Kai. Kai, my wife Lila. Come. I’ll show you to the guest room and you can rest a little before we begin.”

The room was just down the hall, and Kaerius was delighted by its wonderfully human sweetness. On the bed was a quilted coverlet with a design of blue and white stars. White curtains were open, letting in the light from a window which looked out upon a flagstoned courtyard. The walls of the room were whitewashed. Kaerius stepped in to examine the nearer of the two paintings. There was a building of stone, and surrounding it were things he thought might be plants covered in a profusion of blooms. Was that a garden in the world of air?

His legs felt weak and shaky with fatigue. He put one hand against the wall, for everything wavered for a moment, and looked around the room again. There was some sort of wooden cabinet against one wall, and he wondered what it was for.

Brighton said kindly, “Take off your boots and take a nap. You look like you could use it. Just come out when you’re ready to start.”

Kaerius nodded. *Thank you.*

Brighton closed the door, leaving Kaerius alone.

For a moment, Kaerius merely stood there, looking about the room again. He hadn’t taken a nap in years! It felt foolish and weak to even consider sleeping in the middle of the day. But when he bent to take off his boots, his head spun and he nearly fell on his face.

He crawled beneath the covers and fell into an exhausted sleep.

He dreamed of the Lord of the Deep, of tentacles wrapped around his throat, and of pain and terror to fracture the mind. But his voice was gone. He could scream until his throat was raw, but no one would hear him.

Chapter 10

The prince of the Mer woke slowly. He opened his eyes to see the strange human room bright with golden afternoon sunlight. His shirt and trousers felt like layers of netting that pulled him into the deeps, and he fought free of the blankets with frustration edging on panic.

Free at last, he stood in the middle of the room and caught his breath. He ran his hands through his hair and straightened his clothes, for humans liked things to be neat. There was a large looking glass in a wooden frame propped against one wall, and he stared at it in fascination. He had seen reflections before, both of himself and of the world around him, but never with such clarity of color and form. He had seen watery, undulating reflections with the green tinge of seawater.

He knew his hair was pale blond, but it looked even brighter and stranger in the glass, like an unruly mop of spun gold. His fingers brushed it away from his eyes, and he felt the bruised knot near his ear. He examined his eyes, noting the deep sea tones in his irises with satisfaction. The sea was beautiful and powerful, and he was proud that his eyes showed his similarity to the ocean.

He bared his teeth, and a hot flush crept to his cheeks. Were humans not ashamed of their dull teeth? At least his interaction with the physician had proven that his jaws were still capable of exerting force. Not to mention how strange it was that his embarrassment produced heat and pinkness in his cheeks.

The Mer prince stepped back and looked himself up and down. His pale, chiseled features and golden hair had been considered quite handsome among the Mer, and his skill in combat and enchanting voice had guaranteed him respect from everyone, even those unimpressed by his looks. But here in Eleria, his looks were just enough different to mark him as foreign. Would the princess see that difference as handsome and desirable, or was it merely a useful tool for her?

He smiled fiercely at the looking glass, noting how the expression made his eyes glitter dangerously. He did not mind being used, as long as she saw his desire and affection in his service. He, a true prince, not a sham or imposter, would serve her in her time of need, and she would recognize his nobility and undeniable charm as he did so.

Kaerius lamented that he could not sing to her of his love, but perhaps that was not such a great setback after all. His voice could sing ships to their doom, could make sailors and pirates and princesses and fisherwomen and humans of all varieties throw themselves into the waters to seek the singer. If he wanted to be sure of her love, he would have to show her himself, not merely the captivating beauty of his voice.

He looked out the window to the courtyard he had only briefly noted earlier. The walls around it appeared to be part of the house, for there were several windows with boxes of flowers beneath them. Several wooden chairs clustered around a wooden table, and there was a round pit with a few pieces of blackened wood in it with more wooden benches around it. Around the edges of the courtyard and in artistic little clusters were ceramic pots filled with numerous varieties of plants. Protected from the wind and passersby, it was a peaceful, secluded retreat, and even at this late afternoon hour, sunlight gilded the space.

Kaerius pulled the boots on again, lamenting their clomping heaviness. Then he opened the door and peeked into the hallway.

Seeing no one, he turned away from the front door and followed the sound of voices until he found Brighton and Lila sitting at a little table in a room filled with strange human things.

Brighton looked up and smiled at him, and Kaerius smiled back, feeling suddenly grateful for the big guard's kindness.

Why did you soften toward me?

"I'm sorry. I don't know what you mean." Brighton stood. "Are you ready?"

The next three hours were filled with a thousand silent questions. Kaerius pointed at unfamiliar things and looked inquiringly at Brighton, who grew increasingly confused by the pattern of the prince's questions. He was familiar with rope but not with thread, with no articles of clothing at all, no kitchen implements, and no furniture, but the substance of wood he knew. He pointed at the buttons on his shirt and the laces on his borrowed

boots, at the onions in the drawer and the little pots of herbs lined up on the window sill, basil and oregano and cilantro and thyme.

"I thought you knew our language. Why don't you know these things?" the guard said at last.

For what reason would a Mer wear a shirt? Where would we obtain the wool *and* cotton *and* linen *you seem to think so ordinary? I don't even know what a sheep looks like. Besides, Mer do not suffer in the cold as you humans do, so we have no need for clothing. And for what purpose would we want sofas or beds or plates? The caress of the water supports and soothes us.*

At Brighton's baffled look, Kaerius made a swimming motion again.

"You lived underwater," Brighton said, with a sigh of skepticism.

Yes. Kaerius nodded firmly.

Brighton clearly did not entirely believe him, but he did not argue further. They spent the afternoon expanding Kaerius's vocabulary of human things and explaining the uses of items like a quill pen, sheets of paper, a handkerchief, and the oven. The Mer prince pointed at his feet, his knees, and his ankles, took off his shoes and pointed at his socks. Then he pulled those off, pointed at his foot-fingers, and received the word "toes." These new appendages required their own names and articles of clothing.

They ate a simple meal of roasted chicken and carrots beside mashed potatoes with butter and sour cream. Kaerius found it all quite strange, but he felt himself better able to handle the disconcerting textures and overpowering flavors of this human food after his much-needed nap.

During dinner, Brighton instructed him on the proper use of each utensil, not only those he saw, but the multitudinous forks, spoons, and knives used at a royal dinner. He must hold each utensil a certain way, use each one only for the prescribed course of food, hold his glass with his fingers just so, and otherwise assume the part of a human prince at least passingly familiar with Elerian customs.

After dinner, when the prince's mind was already swirling with a thousand new words and rules of etiquette, Brighton said, "Now we will teach you to dance."

The guard explained that there were several rhythms most commonly used in dancing songs. He clapped each rhythm, and then had Kaerius clap them while he and Lila demonstrated the foot movements.

Brighton smiled at his wife as they danced, and Kaerius felt a strange, unfamiliar longing in his heart. Not for Lila, though she was pretty enough, but for that warmth and familiarity, the comfort they had with each other. The Mer admired, respected, and desired Kaerius, but he could not recall the last time anyone looked at him with sweet affection. His father was frustrated by him, the ladies wished he would look their direction, the warriors argued with him, obeyed him, and fought beside him. Most revered him for his heroism in battle.

He had allies. Even a few friends.

He lacked nothing but Marin's love and admiration, and he would earn that soon enough.

Kaerius concentrated on the rhythm, ignoring the heaviness in his heart and the pang of longing for something he could not identify.

The humans moved their feet with nearly as much facility as they moved their hands, and Kaerius would need all his wits to remember the patterns of the various dances.

After demonstrating several dance steps that matched each rhythm, and showing him how the steps could be strung together like knots on a rope, Brighton suggested that Kaerius dance with Lila.

The prince stepped forward, holding his left hand up as Brighton had and putting his right hand lightly against Lila's waist. He kept his eyes on hers. She smiled at him, warm and sweet and compassionate, and he wondered suddenly whether she felt sorry for him. Did he look pitiful?

He straightened his shoulders even more and smiled regally back at her. He was not someone to be pitied or scorned.

Her eyes danced with humor, but she said nothing other than quiet corrections to his footwork. Brighton told him how the man was expected to lead the dance, but the woman was expected to follow, and a skillful dance partner made the act much more enjoyable. The princess was quite skillful, and she would follow his lead well, if he could learn even a little of the motions.

Heel, toe. Heel, toe. One, two, three. One, two, three. Turn and twirl his partner. Kaerius felt his mind swirling with the unfamiliar steps, and he wished they could see him in his element, strong and fierce and regal. He had underestimated how frustrating and humiliating it would be to seem so unsophisticated, so uneducated in the ways of royalty. A Mer dance was far lovelier than this, with the flash of light on glittering scales and the swish of

water on one’s skin, not to mention the exuberant leaps into the air. Human movement, limited by gravity to only one plane, seemed almost claustrophobic in comparison.

He stumbled, suddenly light-headed, and Brighton caught him under one arm.

“Are you dizzy?” the man asked.

Kaerius nodded, and the movement made the whole room seem to spin around him.

“I think you’ve had enough for one day,” Brighton said. “I’ll help you to bed.”

Kaerius straightened by force of will, but he had no desire to argue.

Chapter 11

Sunlight lit the room in soft gold. Kaerius woke to the strange sensation of warm air upon his face. He thrashed violently, only to realize that he had turned so that his face was half-buried in the fluffy pillow, and it was his own breath that had so startled him.

He turned over and stared at the ceiling and around the room. The warmth and comfort of the bed and the bright, clean furnishings seemed delightfully unpretentious and hospitable. The house was nearly silent, but he could hear low voices several rooms away and birdsong outside.

When he finally emerged from this cocoon of safety and comfort, he found that breakfast had long been put away and Brighton and Lila were preparing lunch together in the kitchen.

“Finally decided to join us?” said Brighton.

I’m sorry. Kaerius leaned against the doorframe. He felt strangely numb and exhausted. Perhaps it was the deluge of new words and ideas and sensations. He had certainly gotten plenty of sleep.

“How are you feeling? You must be hungry.” Lila smiled at him for a moment, and Brighton glanced at him to see his answer.

I could eat. Kaerius rubbed his chest and took a deep, bracing breath, feeling how the air stung the deepest parts of his lungs. He turned away to cough, bracing one hand against the doorframe. His pulse throbbed in his ears.

“Goodness,” said Lila in alarm. “Are you all right?”

Kaerius nodded. *I’m sorry*, he signed again. *The kraken gave me lungs that needed air while I was still far below the surface. I wasn’t fully prepared for that. I think I’m coping rather well, all things considered.*

“Why don’t you sit down? Lunch is almost ready.” Lila pointed toward the table.

Kaerius sank into the nearest chair and watched as Brighton and Lila moved about the kitchen in quiet cooperation, as if this ritual of preparing

meals together was comfortable and familiar. He had never thought much about human families, but this domestic scene appeared unexpectedly charming.

Lila put plates on the table while Brighton filled cups with water from a glass pitcher in which floated little pieces of several kinds of fruit. The kettle on the stove began to shriek, and Lila poured the steaming water into another kettle.

“Even when he coughs, there’s no sound,” Lila said to Brighton. She looked at Kaerius with new sympathy.

“Is there more saltwater in your lungs? Or do you think it’s nearly gone?” Brighton studied him.

I’m fine. Kaerius smiled, feeling the fatigue lingering at the back of his mind. *Thank you for your hospitality*.

After lunch, Brighton and Lila gave Kaerius more instruction on etiquette and dancing, and then Brighton kissed his wife goodbye and led Kaerius back up the cliffside road to the palace. He stopped by a room which seemed to be for laundry, spoke with a woman briefly, and received a stack of clothes. Then he led Kaerius onward through the maze of corridors and stairwells until they reached Kaerius’s room.

“Here you are.” Brighton put the stack of clothes on the bed. “Use the belt; your trousers are about to fall off. Besides, it’s more polished.” Then he stepped out of the room and closed the door.

Kaerius dressed slowly, doing his best to ignore the fatigue that throbbed like his pulse in his chest and head. The trousers were of deep blue-green fabric, a warm wool that slid smoothly over his skin. There was a crisp white shirt that fit his shoulders surprisingly well and buttoned up with smooth mother of pearl. Over the shirt, he buttoned a vest of the same blue-green wool with pale gold embroidery, and over that, he slipped on a jacket of the same fabric. It settled around his shoulders, warm and thick and strangely comforting, for all he was so unused to fabric at all. The cuffs and upright collar were accented with more pale gold embroidery. The belt must be the leather strap that fit through the loops on his trousers, and he puzzled out the buckle with an unconscious smile of interest.

He sat on the bed to pull on socks, and then slipped his feet into new, shiny black boots that constricted his feet more than the other pair. They were lighter, but they rubbed uncomfortably in a few spots. No matter. He was a prince of the Mer; he would not complain over a little friction. It was hardly worth noticing beside all the other discomforts and unpleasant surprises of this world.

He stood up and smoothed his hand down the front of his jacket and tugged on the bottom hem. He felt constrained, almost trapped, but his weak human body was warm in these layers of fabric. Did he look elegant enough to woo a human princess?

After running his hands through his hair a few times, he straightened his shoulders and stepped out into the hallway.

Brighton looked him up and down with a critical eye. “Fix your hair,” he said finally.

Kaerius ran a hand through it again, feeling magnanimous to take that much trouble. His hair was perfect already.

“Are you ready to face your first adversary?” the guard asked.

I am beautiful, and Her Highness already trusts me. Also, I am a prince. I fear nothing. Kaerius smiled fiercely.

“Follow me.”

The sound of their footsteps echoed as Kaerius followed Brighton through the corridors. After ascending several flights of stairs, at last they reached a set of large wooden doors standing open with guards stationed on each side. The hall beyond was brightly lit with a hundred lanterns above, as well as the beginning of a brilliant sunset through the windows along the side of the room that looked over the ocean. Musicians played softly in one of the far corners.

Brighton nodded to the guards and spoke briefly to the servant standing just inside the door, then continued into the room, leaving Kaerius alone.

The servant looked at him, waiting, and the prince stepped forward.

“His Royal Highness Prince Kai,” boomed the servant, and the few people in the center of the room turned to see him.

Brighton had already informed him that the people here were Elerian nobility, Marin’s subjects, and though several of the men had privately expressed romantic interest in Marin, they all understood the political

necessity of her marrying one of the visiting lords. They might not be happy about it, but they understood.

The princess herself would arrive just before the visiting delegation, for though she was the highest ranked and thus would normally be expected to make an entrance, she also must act as host.

Kaerius walked through the doors with his head high. His boots echoed in the relative quiet, and he felt the sound portentous. His steps were also slightly painful; the places the boots rubbed seemed more uncomfortable by the minute. But he would not complain, even if he could have.

He strode to the nearest nobleman and gave the very faintest bow, as Brighton had informed him was appropriate for a prince to a lower-ranked nobleman.

The man bowed in return. “Prince Kai,” he murmured, eying Kaerius with interest. “I am Etin Sarith.” He didn’t mention his title, though Brighton had said everyone attending was titled in some way. “Her Highness informed me of your unusual situation and asked me to introduce you to those of higher rank in our court.”

I am pleased to make your acquaintance. Kaerius wondered what exactly the man had been told.

“You really don’t talk?” said the man.

Kaerius shook his head. *It is a minor, temporary inconvenience. It would be unwise to estimate me merely because I cannot speak.*

With a soft *hm,* the young lord introduced him to the others one by one, and Kaerius gave them the same regal nod as they bowed to him. There were ladies, too, who wore colorful silk dresses, feathers in their hair, and jewels in their ears. He bowed to them just a little more deeply, because it seemed the gallant thing to do, and it pleased him to see them titter and blush.

Of course, none of them were as lovely as the princess. He was amused by them, entertained by the sight of their pretty faces and bright colors, but he was not fickle.

At least some of these noble guests had been informed of his visit from a foreign land and intent to court their princess, in hopes that his silence and strange customs would be a little less surprising, and to explain Marin’s interest in him. It was odd for a prince to travel alone, but this had been explained with a cover story: Kaerius’s servants had been sent out to

become familiar with Eleria, and he was alone in the palace. He wanted to meet the nobility with little fanfare, and so he had requested that he be allowed to arrive before the princess to this ball.

“Her Royal Highness Marin de Gracey,” intoned the servant at the door.

The princess swept in with her head high and a sweet smile. She accepted their bows and curtsies with grace and had a kind word for everyone.

Of course she was beloved! She was ready to sacrifice her own happiness, her own life, for the sake of her people. If there was a little edge of nervous tension in her smile, it only stirred up more love for her in her subjects.

At the edge of the gathering, Brighton stood, quiet and unobtrusive save for his height and strength, and most of the guests ignored him. A few murmured polite greetings, which he returned. His attention was always on the princess and those nearest her.

Kaerius met her at the center of the hall, feeling that he had waited long enough. He took her hand and bowed over it, every line of his body elegant and sure. What did it matter that his feet were rubbed raw in these horrible boots? She thought him a false suitor, but he would make her understand that he meant every sign of devotion.

When he straightened, he drew her into the position for dancing. The music was only quiet background ambiance, not dancing music, but Kaerius neither knew nor cared. He wanted *her*; dancing was only a means to show her that fact.

He raised his eyebrows, a little smile playing over his lips.

The slightest flush pinked her cheeks, and she said, “It is early to dance.”

He took the first step, trying to remember what came next. He held her gaze. Perhaps it was early, but he wanted to make his intentions ridiculously obvious.

“Lord Hugh Ralph, of Boravia,” intoned the servant at the door.

Marin stepped out of the dance, and Kaerius turned with her to face the door, still holding her hand, until she drew it away. He let her go with an inward sigh.

The Boravian lord was quite a bit taller than Kaerius, nearly as tall as Brighton. His hair was dark and luscious, curling in little ringlets around his

head and down to his shoulders. His eyes flashed beneath heavy brows. He strode forward without hesitation and bowed deeply before the princess.

"Your Royal Highness," he said with impeccable courtesy. "It is an honor to see your beauty in person. I do hope to become better acquainted." When he smiled, his eyes lit with something like warmth and desire.

Marin nodded and said, "I hope this evening is a pleasant beginning to our acquaintance." Her smile was as sweet as ever, though her eyes were a little wary. "I ought to introduce you to Prince Kai, visiting from across the sea. He does not speak, so do not take his silence as discourtesy."

Kaerius nodded with regal condescension.

The Boravian lord's jaw tightened a little, and he said, "I hope I do not have competition for your hand tonight, Your Highness. I am sure you recognize what I can offer. Wealth. Power. Devotion." He smiled slowly, as if teasing her. "Your Highness," he said, turning his dark eyes to Kaerius in a brief scrutiny. "Might I ask how you came to be mute?"

You may ask, but you won't understand the answer.

Lord Ralph studied him. "I am sure you have been met with utmost courtesy, Your Highness. Eleria is blessed with a most generous and compassionate princess."

Indeed. Kaerius turned an admiring smile toward Marin.

Music rose around them, and Lord Ralph said smoothly, "Will you honor me with the first dance, Your Highness?"

Marin smiled regretfully. "I have already promised it to His Highness, but I will be delighted to honor you with the next, if that pleases you?"

It was obvious that this did not please Lord Ralph, but he merely smiled politely and stepped away, letting Marin turn to Kaerius with a smile.

Kaerius took her hand again and put his other hand on her waist. The warmth of her body through the fabric sent a thrill of desire through him, and it took no effort at all to ignore the pains in his feet. The steps came easily, for he had always been quick and graceful, and he remembered them nearly without error.

For several turns, they were alone in the center of the dance floor. Kaerius delighted in the knowledge that they were a striking couple: the pretty young princess with her sweet smiles and perceptive eyes, and the silent prince who was captivated by her. His hands were strong and gentle on her waist and in her hand, and she smiled at him as if she could not help

it. Where her hand rested on his shoulder, his skin tingled and his muscles were tight and aware of her every subtle movement. His golden hair flowed over the collar of his coat, brighter and lovelier than that of any of her other suitors. He smiled without a trace of modesty or pretension, fully confident of his charm and utterly convinced of the rightness of his regard for her.

"Does your head hurt?" she asked.

He blinked, not sure what had prompted the question.

"Where Brighton hit you."

He shook his head, not willing to let go of her hand to answer in more detail. Perhaps it hurt a little, but the ache was easily forgotten in the delight of her presence.

She said under her breath, "I will dance with Ralph next, and then several of my subjects. At some point, I will no longer be able to put him off, and I will dance with him a second time. You may ask me to dance after that, and then I will stay for only a little longer. If you can listen to him a little, find out what he is like, it would be helpful. Also, it would be very helpful if you can intercept him asking me to dance a third time; putting him off would be rude, but departing too quickly after our second dance as if I am fleeing would also be discourteous."

Kaerius nodded his understanding of these whispered words. He spun her and caught her close again, willing her to see his love in his eyes.

When the music shifted to a new song, the other guests began to take their places. Marin turned away and let out a small, "Oh!"

"Your Highness," said Lord Ralph's deep, pleasant voice. "I did not mean to startle you. I did, however, want to claim the next dance, if you will do me the honor."

"I would be delighted," Marin said.

Kaerius watched Lord Ralph swirl away, and his nostrils flared with frustration. The foreign lord was tall, dark, handsome, polished, and graceful, and it made the prince itchy and annoyed to think of the lovely princess admiring Lord Ralph instead of him.

A blue-clad bulk loomed at his shoulder, and he glanced up to see Brighton standing just behind him. "You danced well," the guard said. "You know what to do?"

The prince nodded grimly. *Dance with the princess five or six times, at least.*

“You might as well dance with a few others, to keep the ruse up. Start with Miss Kirsi over there, wearing the green dress.” Brighton waited until Kaerius nodded that he had identified her, and then said, “Then Miss Avaly, in pink to your left.”

Kaerius nodded again. It was logical to dance with others, even if he did not care for them.

He followed these instructions for the sake of the princess, not for the sake of this strange thing they called dancing. The fact that gravity limited the dancers to only horizontal movement still frustrated him. Nevertheless, it was surprisingly pleasant to spin the young ladies in such intricate patterns. He accepted their admiration and compliments on his dancing with roguish smiles, delighted with himself for his new skill and delighted with them for recognizing and enjoying it. His sparkling eyes and quick feet won him many admirers even in those two dances, and when he nodded politely in the human way to his second partner, she fluttered her eyelashes at him.

The music swirled around him, and he turned away from the young lady. She was not the princess he loved. He cast his gaze over the dancers, looking for Marin.

She was dancing with some other nobleman, one with whom she seemed friendly, for she was smiling up at him in a way that made Kaerius’s stomach turn. But he remembered how he had misunderstood her affection for Brighton, and he ruthlessly squashed his jealousy. This was likely some trusted ally from her own court.

A few feet to the prince’s left, Lord Ralph smiled at someone and then turned toward Kaerius.

“Your Highness,” he said, his dark eyes raking up and down the Mer prince again. “How long have you been in Eleria?”

Nearly two days now. I think it’s going quite well. Kaerius smiled at the Boravian lord and held his hands together in a simple sign indicating a small amount.

“What do you think of it so far?” Lord Ralph asked.

The prince chuckled softly. *I haven’t seen much of the country, but I’ve been madly in love with the princess for quite some time. I hope you don’t plan on actually marrying her.* He looked toward Marin and waited until Lord Ralph followed his gaze, then pointed at his own heart and pantomimed handing it to her.

“Imbecile,” muttered Lord Ralph. He raised his chin and looked down at Kaerius. “Surely you’re not here for love? I suppose she’s pretty enough, but Eleria is the prize. Pretending otherwise is foolish.”

So you’re blind as well as stupid. Yes, I love her, and I would love her just as much if she had no title at all.

The man’s eyes narrowed a fraction, and then his face smoothed. “I hate to be rude, Your Highness,” he said, “but I ought to inform you that I intend to win the princess’s hand in marriage.”

Kaerius raised his eyebrows with a scornful little smile. *Good luck with your doomed quest then. We should all strive to reach our full potential. Unfortunately, I doubt your potential is anywhere near impressive enough to marry Her Highness.* He knew Lord Ralph would not understand the words, but he would understand the disdain that dripped from Kaerius’s signs and the curl of his lip.

“I hesitate to imagine how infuriating you would be if you could talk.” Ralph smiled, though his eyes were cold and calculating. “How foolish to attempt to make such a match for love. I suppose we are rivals then.”

Kaerius nodded once, baring his teeth in a fierce smile of triumph. *You understand me perfectly, idiot human.*

“Well, if you’re smart, you’ll look elsewhere for love. Her Highness knows the benefits of an alliance with Boravia far outweigh whatever you can offer.”

The Mer prince’s smile widened. *Your ignorance and arrogance are understandable, since you are too stupid to realize when you are outclassed. At least I don’t have to feel sorry for you when you lose her, since I know now that you are neither kind nor honorable enough to deserve her.* Then, for good measure, he clicked his teeth in the Mer gesture that meant something like *I would eat you, but you aren’t worth the trouble*.

The Boravian lord sniffed contemptuously. “Just stay out of the way, idiot prince, or you’ll find out what happens to those who oppose Boravia.” He stalked toward the princess.

Kaerius’s skin tingled with intensity of his fury. How *dare* that insolent, arrogant foreigner presume to think he had any claim upon the princess? He could scarcely keep himself from lunging at Lord Ralph and demanding a duel right there.

But Marin would not be pleased by Lord Ralph’s death on her dance floor, at least not now. So Kaerius restrained himself to a furious, silent

snarl and watched, his heart burning, as Lord Ralph bowed to the princess and drew her into the next dance. He found Brighton not far away and approached him, holding up two fingers to confirm that this was Lord Ralph's second dance with the princess. Brighton nodded.

The princess danced well, and Kaerius admired her graceful turns and easy skill. She did not look frightened, and he did not know her well enough to see any sign of hidden nerves. She smiled at Lord Ralph, apparently confident and willing to listen to him, but far from entranced. Kaerius smiled a little to himself. He liked her confidence; she would choose him at the end because he was a worthy partner for her, not because she was terrified of Lord Ralph or Boravia. She would choose Kaerius because she wanted to, not because she was forced to.

He danced with another young lady Brighton suggested to him, only to avoid drawing attention as a disagreeable guest. The heels of his boots clicked on the floor, and the room echoed with voices and music. All the sounds were different without water to muffle and distort them. The world seemed painfully loud and clear, with so many echoes off so many surfaces that it was disorienting.

There was a tittering little knot of young ladies who giggled as he walked past.

"Prince Kai," someone whispered, as if he were an object of admiration.

He turned and beamed at them. Perhaps they were not entirely stupid, if they thought him handsome enough to titter and sigh over.

Lord Ralph had left the princess only one song before, and Kaerius realized with a start that he was walking her direction again. The Mer prince lengthened his own strides and whirled the princess into the next dance just before the Boravian lord reached her.

Marin looked up at him with her lovely eyes, and it felt like the warmth of the sun on his face. He smiled down at her, forgetting his dislike of Lord Ralph and the raw spots on his feet and even the unfamiliar tightness of the fabric about his shoulders.

She did not say much, but it made his heart flutter a little to see how her gaze softened when she met his. He felt the sweetness of his own smile, so unlike his fierce pride of only a few minutes earlier.

Too soon, the dance was over, and Lord Ralph was there, tall and handsome and politely infuriating. He shot Kaerius a dark look before

turning back to Marin with a smile.

"Your Highness, might I have this dance?"

"I would like to rest a moment," Marin said apologetically.

Kaerius turned away for a moment and accepted a flute of sparkling wine from a passing servant. He presented it to Marin with a smile and raised an eyebrow at the foreign lord's irritated sniff. He reached across to take the princess's opposite hand and bowed over it, then gently tugged her toward one of the many couches lining the walls. This maneuver had the delightful benefit of allowing him to neatly shoulder his way between Marin and Lord Ralph, and the larger man nearly growled under his breath as he realized how deftly he had been put off.

Marin sank into the couch as if she really were tired, and Kaerius was reminded of how painful his own new feet were. Did everyone's toes and heels feel like they had been rubbed raw? No one else seemed to be in pain, so he kept his expression serene.

"Thank you." Marin smiled up at him, and he knelt beside her, having been informed by Brighton earlier that he was not to sit while the princess was present. After she departed for the evening, the guests were permitted to rest upon the couches.

I am delighted to serve as your protection from arrogant foreign lords. Kaerius beamed at her. *How may I delight you, Your Highness?*

"I think I will rest a few moments," said Marin quietly. "Lord Ralph is coming."

Kaerius remained kneeling as the Boravian lord approached and merely looked up at the taller man with a gleeful hostility in his eyes.

"Your pardon, Your Highness," Ralph said, ignoring the strange, silent prince for the moment. "I did not mean to press you when you were fatigued."

"Thank you for your thoughtfulness." Marin smiled up at him. "I confess that I have heard some concerning rumors about Boravia. But you seem considerate and kind. Is that what I can expect from an alliance with Boravia? Kindness and consideration? I am sure you understand I must do what is right not only for my own heart, but for my people." She said this in the most hopeful, pleasant voice possible, as if she wanted to believe the best of Ralph and his country.

"You would be treated with the highest respect," the lord said smoothly. "My own position is next to that of the king, and Boravia has

long desired a closer relationship with Eleria."

The princess said, "I know you have long desired Eleria's ports."

Lord Ralph's jaw tightened. "Of course, there are benefits to Boravia from an alliance. Surely you are not so naive as to imagine someone of my status would pursue an Elerian bride on a personal whim."

"Of course not," Marin murmured.

"That is not to say I find no pleasure in the pursuit," said Lord Ralph, with a tight smile. "I find your little palace rather charming, in its own roughhewn way, and as for Your Highness, well, I find I quite agree with your own people that you are the Jewel of the North. You are even more beautiful than I had hoped."

Kaerius snarled to himself and clicked his teeth in disgust. The Boravian lord shot him a sharp look and raised his chin.

"Thank you," the princess said quietly.

When the music shifted to another song, Lord Ralph said, "I do hope you are not indisposed, Your Highness. I was hoping to dance with you twice more before you retired for the evening."

Kaerius stood at this. *Give her time to think, you insolent guppy.*

"Remove yourself," growled the Boravian lord. "You are not part of this conversation."

The prince's nostrils flared with the effort of keeping his temper under control. *Remove your worthless carcass from the princess's sight before I throw you off the cliff to the sharks*, he signed furiously. The specifics of this threat were lost on the humans, but the anger in his motions was not.

"Prince Kai," said the princess. She stood and put a hand on his arm, and he stilled his hands. "Lord Ralph, I think we must continue our discussion tomorrow. Tonight is for dancing. I hope you enjoy the music."

He put out a hand to her. "Will you honor me with this dance?"

"I really shouldn't," she said, as warmly as she could. "I would not want to give you a false impression of the state of our negotiations."

"And if I promise not to presume too much?" He took her hand and began to draw her forward.

She tried to pull away, and he tightened his grip for a moment, then let her go.

"I would hate to give you a false impression of the same," he said in a low voice. "I will not be put off by other suitors with far less to offer than the might of Boravia. I can make you happy, Your Highness."

Marin looked up at him from under her dark lashes. “Thank you for your compliments, Lord Ralph. Good evening.”

She started off, and Kaerius paused only to give the Boravian lord a sharp, triumphant smile before he followed her.

At the far edge of the dance floor, he stepped in front of her and caught her hand, bowed over it, and looked up, with a little delight in his eyes. *Dance with me?* She looked confused, and he spun her into the next turn with a graceful step, ignoring the stinging of his feet.

She bit her lip against a smile and shook her head, and hurried out the door with Kaerius on her heels. Brighton was suddenly there too, though Kaerius had not noticed him in some time.

“I don’t want to antagonize him by dancing with you three times,” said Marin, as if she owed Kaerius an apology.

Of course. I should not have done that. I *want to antagonize him, though.* Kaerius bowed repentantly, though he couldn’t help a silent chuckle.

Chapter 12

I can offer you a much nicer guest room this evening," said Marin as they walked down the hall. "The room you stayed in the first night was hardly fit for a visiting prince, and it would be wise to keep up appearances."

Kaerius nodded, suppressing a grimace at the pain in his feet. He had felt many kinds of pain in his life, but not this hot, raw friction that throbbed with every step.

Marin continued, "Brighton, my meeting with Ralph is at ten o'clock tomorrow morning, and I would like you to attend. Before that, might I prevail upon you to continue Prince Kai's protocol lessons? I would like him at lunch tomorrow in the garden room, and then at dinner in the upper reception hall."

"Yes, Your Highness," said Brighton. "I'll take him to the blue room after I take you to your suite." He added with an amused smile, "I'll send Jill to get him ready for lunch tomorrow."

Marin chuckled, and the sweet sound brought a delighted smile to Kaerius's face. "Tell her that I find him useful, so if she's annoyed by that, she can come argue with me."

Brighton laughed aloud.

Who is Jill? signed Kaerius.

Marin said, "We probably ought to learn a few more of your signs before tomorrow. Verbs would be useful, I think. Need, want, what else?" She glanced at her guard.

In a few moments, they arrived at Marin's side of the royal quarters, which included her bedroom, bathing room, and a number of private sitting rooms of varying degrees of formality. "Let's sit down," said Marin. She led them into the most exterior of the reception rooms.

She sat in one of a pair of blue velvet chairs and motioned that Brighton and Kaerius could sit across from her on a matching couch.

“Why didn’t you stand up when Ralph approached me?” Marin asked, as if she had been puzzling on this question for several minutes. “He was offended that you didn’t.”

I do not regret offending him, but why would he be offended by that? Kaerius tilted his head and looked between Marin and Brighton.

“If I may, Your Highness?” At her nod, Brighton continued. “Ralph is accustomed to men standing in his presence, because he postures and asserts dominance with his height and physicality. Remaining kneeling like that was almost a subservient position, but your expression was anything but humble. Did you do that intentionally to unnerve him?”

Not at all. Your body language is alien to me. In the water, higher and lower physical positions of one’s head have no bearing on social dominance. I assert my dominance by clicking my teeth, with the strength of my body, with my fighting and hunting prowess, with my brilliant mind, and with my social alliances. He laughed a little to himself. *Though I do not regret unnerving or insulting Ralph. I am delighted to have done so!*

Marin bit her lip, her expression troubled. “I don’t suppose it hurt your standing in court too much. Your expression was far too confident to have given anyone the impression you were afraid of him.”

I certainly hope not!

“What is ‘need’ in your sign language?”

Kaerius showed them, and they imitated the sign. They spent nearly an hour trying to think of words and learn them, and at the end, when Marin indicated by a subtle shift that she was ready to retire, Kaerius tested them on each sign to ensure that they remembered what they had learned.

“Do your people all speak this language?” said Marin at last. “And use words as well?”

Kaerius nodded. *It is useful to be able to communicate silently when necessary. But in the deeps and over long distances, there is not enough visibility for signs, so we sing too. My voice is exceptional, and I look forward to singing for you when I have won your love, my voice, and my life.*

The princess studied his expression. “Are you speaking of love?” she ventured.

The Mer prince’s smile gleamed with triumph. *Yes!* He pantomimed handing her his heart and bowed his head.

Marin swallowed. “You are very kind,” she said at last. “But I did not intend to lead you on when I asked for your service in this matter. I am grateful for your service and your assistance with Lord Ralph, but I implore you not to read more into our relationship than that. It is merely in the service of Eleria that I have asked for your help. You should expect no more than that.”

While Kaerius’s confidence was unshaken, the grief and regret in her eyes made his smile soften. *Do not grieve for me, as if you have already broken my heart. I have given it to you, and I am sure it is safe, whether you realize it yet or not.*

Anyway, if you break it, I won’t live too long with the sting of rejection.

Her teeth worried her lower lip.

Kaerius couldn’t look away. *You are even more beautiful than I remembered.*

Brighton said quietly, “If that is all, Your Highness, I’ll take him to his suite here and let Jill know the schedule for tomorrow.”

“Thank you.” Marin smiled at them.

Kaerius barely concealed a wince as he stood. His feet seemed sticky and exquisitely painful.

“Goodnight.”

The two men bowed to her. Brighton nodded to the guards outside her quarters and led Kaerius away.

Three staircases and two long hallways later, Brighton met a woman at a heavy wooden door. “Jill,” he said with a smile.

The woman nodded, her dark eyes sweeping up and down Kaerius’s trim figure. “He does look adequately princely, with the right clothes,” she admitted. “How did it go this evening?”

“Quite well, I think,” said Brighton. “Come on out of the hall.”

He ushered them into the room and closed the door firmly behind them. They were in a luxurious sitting room, with white silk couches arranged near a fireplace, a breakfast table with more chairs, and several doors leading to other rooms. The walls were painted a pale blue, like the morning sky on a clear day, and Kaerius liked it immediately.

“Her Highness wants Prince Kai prepared to join her and the Boravian envoy for lunch tomorrow. Tonight, he needs a haircut and dinner. I’ll see him in the morning before I escort the princess to her meeting with Ralph at ten.”

Brighton turned to Kaerius. “Do you need anything before I go?”

I don’t like these boots. Kaerius felt a little silly to complain, but if they expected him to dance again any time soon, he would appreciate something a little more comfortable.

“Something about the boots?” Brighton frowned. “Do they pinch?”

Kaerius made a *not exactly* gesture. He sat on the floor, untied the boots, and pulled them off, grimacing.

“Good heavens!” exclaimed Jill. “You’ve bled right through your socks.”

He peeled off the socks, wincing as the fabric pulled away from the open blisters. The chilly air stung the raw spots in piercing, painful relief, and Kaerius’s breath hitched a little.

Brighton knelt beside him and examined the prince’s feet. “I thought they fit better than that,” he said, half in apology and half in confusion. “Have you never worn boots at all? Why didn’t you tell me they hurt?”

The Mer prince’s beautiful, new feet did not look lovely now. The grief of this struck him like a shark from below, a sudden, gut-wrenching terror that Marin would see only ugliness and weakness when he meant to show her strength.

Was he not worthy of her after all?

Kaerius took a deep, shuddering breath and shoved the fear away. He would hide the pain from her, and if she were horrified by his ruined feet, at least he would not have to be ashamed of his weakness before her.

Brighton rubbed a hand over the faint scruff of beard that darkened his jaw. “Well, you can’t wear those again. Her Highness won’t expect you to dance like that, but it would be good if you can still walk.”

I can dance. Kaerius firmed his jaw.

The guard said, “I’ll bring some of Lila’s silk stockings tomorrow. We’ll put them under the wool socks, and that should help reduce friction. Then we’ll get boots a size bigger and see how that feels. All right?” He put an encouraging hand on Kaerius’s shoulder. “I suppose if you’ve never worn boots before, your feet wouldn’t be accustomed to them.”

Kaerius nodded once, not sure if Brighton was being sarcastic or sympathetic or merely humoring him. He didn't want to be angry with the guard though, even if the words were mocking.

Perhaps he really was worthy of mockery, and not as irresistible as he'd imagined. He looked down at his borrowed clothes, so fine and yet rumpled as he sat upon the floor with his legs stretched out before him. Did he look worthy of the princess? What did he really have to offer in this human world, where even the boots rubbed him raw?

Jill said, "Her Highness said she wanted him to still look foreign, so I was going to just even up his hair, not take much off. A good brushing would do wonders, I think."

"He really is foreign," Brighton said quietly.

Jill pulled a plain wooden chair from the corner of the room and said, "Take off your jacket and shirt and sit here."

Brighton offered Kaerius a hand and hauled him to his feet. The prince unbuttoned and removed his jacket, vest, and shirt in succession, conscious of Brighton's and Jill's scrutiny. He had never minded his scars much; they were evidence of his courage in battle against rival Mer clans, sharks, and other dangers of the sea.

But boots? That was mortifying. He ought not to have complained at all.

When Jill pulled out the comb and razor, he recoiled a little, and he couldn't help how his gaze followed the razor as she put it on the nearby table.

Brighton said, "She's not going to cut you, you know. Surely you've had a haircut before."

Kaerius's eyes flicked to him for a moment, and then back to the razor. *Not with a blade like that.*

Seeing the tension in him, the woman stopped and sighed. "If the princess finds you useful, that's good enough for me. Stop looking at me like I'm about to slit your throat."

The prince nodded jerkily. *I don't like knives near my throat. But I will choose to trust you*. It took a great deal of self-control to remain still and keep his expression halfway calm when Jill picked up the comb and razor and stepped behind him. He clenched his hands in the fabric of his trousers.

Brighton lingered, apparently deciding that Kaerius did not need to be left alone in this deeply unsettling situation.

The comb through the prince's golden waves was oddly soothing, but Kaerius could not relax into the sensation. He willed himself to keep his breaths steady as Jill took her time getting the tangles out. She worked carefully around the knot above his ear.

Then, on the other side, she stopped, her fingers hovering just above the faded scar that started beneath his jaw and curved up behind his ear. "I'm sorry," she said, her voice more subdued. "I didn't realize."

I was not offended. He motioned for her to continue.

With movements even more careful and gentle than before, she worked out the knots on this side. Finally she said, "I'm going to start cutting now. Just keep still."

She worked with steady, unhurried competence. The razor made a soft *snick, snick*, and he tried not to shudder. When Jill stepped back to consider her work, Kaerius signed, *Will Her Highness like it?*

Brighton smiled a little. "Her Highness will like it. Ralph won't, though."

In another ten minutes, Jill said she was finished. He was allowed to go into the private bathing room to wash off the little bits of golden hair that had stuck to his shoulders. He sank into the waiting tub of warm water with a sense of desperate relief. His feet shot brilliant tongues of pain up his legs at the touch of the water, but he didn't care. He ran his fingers through his hair and clasped trembling fingers behind his neck.

It would all be worth it if Marin would see him for who he was and who he wanted to be. *You are my beloved. I want to be yours.*

Loud knocking brought Kaerius to sudden, startled alertness. He stumbled from the bed and tugged on trousers before making his way to the door. He opened it to see Brighton and stood aside to let in the taller man.

"How are your feet this morning?" Brighton asked.

Kaerius nodded. *I can dance.* His sleep had been restless, and his bare feet felt strangely vulnerable against the cold stone floor. But the sky outside showed the first golden light of morning, and he felt a rush of hope and determination. He coughed, annoyed that the pressure on his chest had not lessened.

“Jill is making you breakfast now. I thought we’d see how the new boots work, so I can get some others if they don’t fit.” He indicated the couch nearby and handed a new pair of boots and a wad of some filmy fabric to Kaerius.

The Mer prince sat on the couch and set the boots down on the floor beside him. He examined the fabric with interest, and then, with a sidelong look at Brighton, he licked the edge. He frowned. Yes, there was a faint hint of the scent of Brighton’s wife. An undertone of soap, not nearly as horrific as the soap he had licked, but noticeable. A very faint hint of Brighton’s sweat. Presumably he’d carried the stockings in his hand much of the walk from his house, or perhaps his hand had been in his pocket with the stocking.

“Did you just lick my wife’s stockings?” Brighton said in shock. “Please don’t lick things!”

Kaerius blinked. *Is it offensive? It isn’t a person. It isn’t even* on *a person.*

Brighton ran both hands over his face and through his hair, as if struggling for words. “Were you really raised by fish? People don’t go around licking things!”

My apologies. Kaerius’s hope and determination seemed suddenly as fragile as the fabric in his hands. Without conscious thought, he put the fabric aside and buried his face in his hands for a moment, pressing the palms of his hands against his eyes like the familiar pressure of deep water. With his eyes still closed, he covered his ears, and the muffled silence, full of the rushing of his blood in his veins, was almost like being underwater.

At a sound, he took a deep, bracing breath. The air was cold against his bare skin, and he coughed, wishing for the familiar pressure of water against his skin instead of this strange weight. Although he didn’t feel ready for the human world, he took his hands from his ears and opened his eyes.

Brighton looked deeply troubled, and when Kaerius met his eyes, he said, “I didn’t mean to frighten you, Kai, and I didn’t mean to imply you aren’t human. I’m concerned that we’ve asked too much of you.”

The prince straightened. *I should not have shown you my weakness that way. It will not happen again.* He pressed his lips together and focused on the stockings, which felt like a thin, dry film. He found the openings and pulled one stocking on each foot, finding that the fabric stretched easily over the new calf muscles he’d barely had a chance to admire. He stretched

out his feet and studied them with a faintly amused gleam in his eyes. The gauzy fabric covered his many blisters with barely a hint of pressure on the raw spots, and when he pulled on the new wool socks tucked in the boots, the socks barely hurt at all.

He hesitated with one boot in his hand. *I'm not human. I told you that. I could hardly be offended by you implying a fact I told you myself. I only look human for now.*

Brighton said, "I ought to have asked how your head feels."

Kaerius blinked and put a hand to the knot above his ear. He shrugged. *It hurts, but you were right to do it. Is the physician recovered?* He wasn't surprised when Brighton didn't understand the question.

"See how the boots feel."

The prince slipped his feet into the boots with a suppressed grimace, then tied the laces and stood. He walked back and forth across the room.

They are probably as comfortable as boots can be.

"Shall I get a bigger size? Or smaller?"

Kaerius shook his head. *Thank you*. He smiled, suddenly grateful for this man who had been so unaccountably kind to him, despite his skepticism. *What can I learn today to be of service to the princess?*

"You might as well take off the boots for now," Brighton said. "Jill is bringing you a new outfit to wear to lunch. Wear the same trousers and the jacket with gold trim to dinner."

Brighton spent the next two hours asking Kaerius for more signs he thought important. The Mer prince was charmed by the guard's quick memory and dedication to this task.

The princess is beautiful.

"The princess…" Brighton frowned. "What about her?"

Beautiful. Kaerius signed it again.

"The princess is beautiful?"

Kaerius nodded, smiling.

The guard leaned forward. "I'm starting to understand your signs a little better. Were you really raised by fish?"

Not exactly. I am a prince of the Mer. We live in the water.

"You used that sign when I asked you whether the boots pinched. Is it like 'sort of' or 'not exactly'?"

Yes!

“Not exactly raised by fish, but something close. Show me the other part again.”

After some time, Kaerius had managed to convey to Brighton his own royal status, the fact that his people lived in the ocean, and that his feet were new. He wasn’t sure exactly how much of this the guard believed, but he felt a surge of elation at having been understood this much.

Along with other words like hope, danger, hear, and trust, Kaerius gave name signs to Jill and the Boravian delegation. Lord Ralph’s name sign designated him by his curly hair. Jill entered just in time to see her name sign, which was derived from the signs indicating the *j* sound and the sign for *rill*, a little stream of water.

“Thank you,” Brighton said. He clapped his hands on his knees and stood. “Jill will get you ready for lunch with the princess and Ralph and escort you where you need to go.”

Thank you.

“He seems very sensitive to strong flavors. If you could let him know what to expect at lunch, it might be helpful.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Thank you.” With that, the guard set off to meet the princess before her meeting with the Boravian lord.

Jill spent the following hour on details. She told Kaerius to stand up straight and measured his body in every dimension. She said it was so they could find him better-fitting clothes and perhaps have some made, if he were to stay more than a week. She straightened his jacket, combed his hair, and arranged it in soft waves that fell over the collar of his jacket. Finally, and most reassuringly, she told him about the foods that he would eat at lunch with the princess and her guests, and attempted to describe their tastes for him.

Thank you.

The woman looked him over critically. “You look quite nice,” she said. “I could almost believe you are a foreign prince.”

Kaerius smiled. *I am.*

Chapter 13

A few minutes later, Jill stepped back out into the hallway to find that the soldier who was to escort Kaerius to lunch was just about to knock on the door.

"He's ready," she said, beckoning the prince forward.

Thank you. Kaerius turned to the young soldier. *What is your name?*

The soldier saluted. "Come with me, Your Highness," he said, with the very faintest sardonic twist to his lips.

How much of the Elerian palace staff knew that Prince Kai was the mostly-drowned stranger on which the princess had taken pity? If many of them knew, how long would it be before the foreign delegations knew, too?

Kaerius nodded at the soldier with regal dignity.

The soldier was tall and lanky, and he strode quickly through the corridors. Kaerius felt his breath come faster as he tried to keep up. His boots were not nearly as painful as the other pair had been before, but they were not exactly comfortable, either; Kaerius wished that going barefoot were the human custom.

The soldier stopped outside a door and said, "In here, Your Highness." He knocked and then, at the answer from within, opened the door and said, "Prince Kai."

Marin stood at his entrance. Kaerius's heart quickened as he thought that at least some of the delight in her eyes might be real, but he told himself to keep his expectations in check. Lord Ralph might be detestable, but marrying him offered real benefits that Marin would be obligated to consider.

"Prince Kai!" she smiled sweetly at him. "Thank you for coming."

I am honored and delighted by every opportunity to see you. Then, hoping to be understood, he added, *Thank you. I honor and love you*. The grammar was less elegant, but she was more likely to understand. He

flicked his gaze toward Brighton in quick acknowledgement, but he did not otherwise greet the guard.

“Your Highness,” said Lord Ralph, with stiff courtesy.

Kaerius merely nodded to him. The room was painted in a pale yellow, with delicate white flowers painted in the corners of the room as if living vines flowed down the walls. One wall of the room was entirely made of windows which looked out over the valley to the east. Kaerius, drawn by this unfamiliar feeling of height, stopped himself from approaching the window to drink in the view only with extraordinary self-control. He could admire the view some other time.

Instead, he sat across from Marin at the foot of the table and reached out to move a vase of white flowers to the side so that he could see her more clearly. He smiled at Marin, his heart exulting in her beauty and his pride relishing Ralph’s suppressed anger.

Servants brought plates of food, and Marin said, “For this meal, I thought I would showcase some of the seafood delicacies of Eleria. I understand that Boravia has long desired our port to improve its access to northern trade routes, but there are other benefits to an alliance.”

Ralph’s stiff posture straightened even more as he said, “I am well aware of the benefits of an alliance with Eleria, Your Highness. My concern is that you do not fully appreciate what Boravia offers.”

Marin smiled gently. “I should like to know that Boravia sees Eleria as an equal partner in any agreement which our nations might reach, not a smaller, weaker nation to be dominated.”

The first course was a creamy soup with chunks of flavorful lobster in it. Ralph closed his eyes in unfeigned bliss in the first bite; perhaps he exaggerated his reaction in order to be disarming, but the appreciation in his voice was quite honest.

“This is sublime,” he said, with his warmest, most charming smile. “I confess I had thought your little palace lacking in a few charms to which I am accustomed, but the existence of such a food demands respect.”

The Mer prince took a cautious spoonful of the soup and found it warm and smooth in his mouth, with a mild flavor, at least compared to other human foods. He might have preferred the lobster raw, but if he had to eat it cooked, this was an entirely satisfying way to enjoy it.

The next course was a large filet of white fish with a sharp, tangy, fruity sauce drizzled atop it, and several varieties of finely diced steamed

vegetables beside it. Brighton's eyes rested upon Kaerius for a moment, and the Mer prince perceived this as the warning it was.

While Lord Ralph exclaimed in delight over this dish, Kaerius took the very tiniest dab of sauce upon one tine of his fork and put it in his mouth. It was strong enough to make his eyes water, and he flashed a quick, grateful look at the guard. He ate a few bites of the fish, avoiding any areas with the sauce, and dared a tiny taste of the vegetables before avoiding them too. They were edible, to be sure, but the intense flavor was likely to provoke a visible flush to his face, and he did not want to draw Ralph's attention in that manner.

Another course was brought which included a number of different items, each of which were apparently unique enough to warrant an explanation. First was another soup which was to act as a palate cleanser from the previous course, and then there was an array of small slices of raw fish of different species atop little mounds of white grains. Each had a dollop of sauce atop the fish slice.

"This is a popular dish here in the city, though not eaten more than a few miles from the coast."

"Is this *raw*?" Ralph said in horrified shock.

"It is." Marin smiled reassuringly. "It is quite mild." She ate a bite using her fingers, with her pinky delicately lifted. She smiled at Kaerius too. "What do you think of it, Prince Kai?"

Kaerius hoped the sauce was not too strong, and, eager to outdo Ralph, put the entire bite in his mouth. *It is absolutely delicious, Your Highness. It warms my heart and elevates my spirits to taste something so delicious and simultaneously tweak the pride of my rival*. Then, to be more clear, he added, *Raw is good! I like it very much.*

Brighton gave an almost inaudible huff as he understood at least a little of this, and Ralph shot him a dark look.

"I spoke too soon, Your Highness." Ralph's nose wrinkled. "I thought Eleria was civilized. Apparently I will have a great deal of work to do to bring culture to your backward little nation."

Marin blinked at him, momentarily at a loss for words. "Have you never tried anything new before, Lord Ralph? Can you not contemplate expanding your world a little?"

Ralph poked at the slices of raw fish with his fork. "Do you mean to tell me you actually eat this? And that this is the sort of hospitality Eleria

offers to guests of status?" He rolled his eyes.

Marin looked him squarely in the eye and ate another bite. She smiled sweetly at him, though there was the very slightest gleam of hidden animosity in her eyes. "I did not realize Boravia was so easily daunted by new experiences. Is it not admirable to face new things, even trials, with courage and grace? Still, I would never want to force anything detestable on an honored guest. Do not fear! There is still the dessert course to look forward to, and if you are hungry, one of the staff will bring you something more palatable."

Lord Ralph's nostrils flared in anger, but he said only, "I am satisfied with the earlier courses and will wait for dessert."

The Mer prince signed, *I did not realize you were a man of such narrow tastes.* He scraped the sauce from each bite of fish and separated the fish from the white grains. Then he popped the fish slices in his mouth one by one. His dull human teeth bit into the tender slices easily, and the faint hints of sauce were not strong enough to make his eyes water, but merely gave a human touch to this familiar delight.

That was delicious! He eyed Ralph's plate and glanced at the Boravian. *If you're too stupid to appreciate yours, may I eat it?*

"Ugh!" Ralph shoved the plate away. "I don't even want to look at it."

Kaerius snorted softly and reached over to pull the plate closer to himself. *Thank you.*

Ralph scowled at him, and Kaerius gestured at the plate. *You don't want it, do you? I may not know your human courtesies, but I hardly intended for you to go hungry.*

The Boravian shuddered and turned away, looking fixedly at the flowers in front of him.

The Mer prince offered the plate to Marin.

"Oh, no, thank you, Prince Kai. I did not realize you liked it so much. I will be sure to have it served again, though of course there will be something else for you, Lord Ralph." Her smile was sweet, but Kaerius thought he saw a little glint of laughter in her eyes.

Dessert was something sweet and creamy with a crunchy crust on top, and though it was certainly edible to Kaerius, he felt it far too complicated and overwhelming after the smooth, fresh, raw fish. He put his little spoon aside after one bite.

"Is it not to your liking, Prince Kai?" asked Marin.

Kaerius smiled, hoping she could see the sincerity in his eyes. *I am satisfied in your presence. A refreshing meal of fish was an unexpected additional pleasure. Annoying Ralph is almost too much enjoyment for one meal! Thank you for your hospitality and kindness.* He made the sign for gratitude clear and emphatic.

"What are you saying?" growled Ralph, glaring at him.

That you are an obnoxious coward who doesn't deserve to sit down with the princess. Kaerius grinned toothily at him. *She'll realize it soon, too.*

Ralph snorted and muttered, "Idiot."

The Mer prince's smile only widened, letting the Boravian lord see that he was not in the least intimidated.

Brighton gave his head the tiniest shake, and Kaerius took it as advice that he ought not provoke the Boravian further.

The prince sighed in frustration. *Coward*. But he did not want to cause Marin trouble, so he contented himself with a scornful glance at Ralph and a smile of appreciation for the servant who reached around him to take his plate. He had not been in the habit of showing gratitude to those of lower station among his own people, but it felt especially satisfying to express this courtesy to Marin's staff in front of Ralph. Ralph alone deserved Kaerius's scorn.

Marin glanced at him and then at Ralph, surreptitiously worrying her lower lip. "I think I'd like a quiet afternoon," she said at last. "Lord Ralph, I believe I will not see you at dinner; I must meet with my advisors. Your delegation will be hosted in the green dining hall at seven o'clock. I will be sure to advise the kitchen of your preferences." She smiled innocently. "Tomorrow Lord Galbraith and his delegation arrive. We will dine together then. Good afternoon."

She stood, and Lord Ralph and Kaerius rose immediately.

Marin swept out of the room and was escorted away by Brighton and several soldiers.

Good afternoon, idiot. The Mer prince flashed a quick, sharp smile at Ralph.

Several other soldiers met Lord Ralph and Kaerius in the corridor.

"I'm to escort you back to your suite," said one of them to Ralph.

The Boravian nodded and set off without further acknowledging Kaerius, and the Mer prince looked at the young soldier who had remained with him.

"Captain Brighton asked me to ask you if you'd like to visit the stables," the young man said.

Kaerius nodded. *Thank you. What are stables? And what is your name?*

The young man nodded and offered a slight, friendly smile. "I'm Lieutenant Sanders, Your Highness. Follow me."

For several minutes they walked in silence, and then Sanders said, "The Captain said you were from far away?" with the faintest question in his voice. "I thought…"

Not so very far. But it is more different than I imagined.

"Will you need Sir Vincent to see you this afternoon? The Captain said you might get pneumonia if there's still water in your lungs." The soldier looked ahead, as if to pretend this statement didn't clearly indicate that he knew Kaerius was the half-drowned vagabond.

I am quite recovered. Thank you. Kaerius signed this with great dignity and then smiled at the young soldier. The satisfaction he felt in showing his appreciation for these underlings was unexpected but profound. Why had he not expressed his gratitude and appreciation of his own people more often? It did not feel like a diminishment of his dignity, as he had thought it would, but rather like a justified acknowledgment of good service.

"Don't worry. Her Highness finds you useful, so we'll keep the secret as long as she wants."

They walked in silence for several more minutes, descending three more staircases and passing through several rooms which held only furniture and paintings. Kaerius's leg muscles began to burn, and he wondered why these silly humans had built their palace on such a high cliff, and why they walked up and down so many stairs so often.

"Here, Your Highness," said Sanders at last. He opened a door and led Kaerius outside into the bright, frigid sunlight.

Kaerius was so delighted by the feel of the wind on his face that he stopped and closed his eyes. He took a deep breath, letting the cold air sting his lungs and ignoring the urge to cough again. The air smelled more of

grass and pine than the ocean, and he looked around to see that they had passed through the lower levels of the palace to the valley side. He followed the soldier across the courtyard and through several wide alleys to an even larger courtyard which opened to a series of expansive meadows which sloped downward toward the river at the bottom of the valley several miles away.

He followed the soldier into a stone building with wooden partitions in it, and his mouth dropped open at the sight inside.

“Many of the horses are out in the fields now, but we always have some stabled for messengers. This is Moonlight, the donkey.”

The donkey was much smaller than the horses, but it fascinated Kaerius just as much as the larger creatures did. Its eyes were soft and limpid, with long, gray eyelashes. Kaerius offered it his hand, instinctively keeping his fingers flat so that they wouldn’t be bitten. The creature nibbled inquisitively at the palm of his hand like a baby seal.

“You want to see Captain Brighton’s horse?” Sanders asked.

Kaerius looked up and left the little donkey to follow the young man farther into the building.

“Here.” Sanders clucked softly to a tall, reddish-brown horse in a large stall. “Her name is Sienna. Isn’t she beautiful?”

The horse tossed her head, as if enjoying the praise, and stepped closer to snuffle at them agreeably.

Kaerius found himself face to face with the beautiful creature. His heart thrilled within him. *It is an honor to meet you, Sienna. Do you speak?*

“Is that your sign language?”

Kaerius nodded, entirely focused on the horse.

“You know horses don’t really understand human speech. They certainly don’t understand sign language. They can learn commands, but…” The young man’s voice trailed away. “I mean, feel free to talk to her however you want. I guess there’s no harm in it.”

The Mer prince sighed softly. It was probably to be expected that a beast like this would not understand him. Dolphins understood a little of the Mer spoken language, but had never understood more than one or two signs, and very few creatures were as intelligent and eager to communicate as dolphins. Kaerius contented himself with pressing his face against the horse’s nose, breathing in its warm exhalations and letting the horse inhale

his breath. He rubbed his hands over the horse's huge head, feeling the strength and heat of its body and the smooth, dense hair that covered it.

You are indeed beautiful.

He was entranced with Sienna and was only drawn away by the promise of other horses to admire.

At last, Sanders said, "The Captain said you could eat dinner with him and his wife, if you want to. The princess is spending the evening with her advisors. It's nearly time, if you want to go."

The prince reluctantly bid the horses farewell, snuffling them each on their noses as they had snuffled him.

"I presume you will want a bath before dinner," said Sanders, with the slightest hint of amusement in his polite voice.

Yes. I am itchy from the hay and I smell of horse. It is a pleasant smell, but I think they would prefer me fresh.

They climbed up the many staircases again, and Kaerius was pleased that while his chest still ached and his legs still burned, he was able to keep up with the tall young soldier without embarrassing himself by stopping to cough or lean dizzily against a wall. Perhaps it was a small victory, but it cheered him.

As he toweled off after a quick bath, he heard a knock on his door. He dressed hurriedly and opened it to see yet another young soldier. "If you're ready, Your Highness, I'll escort you to dinner."

A few minutes later, he joined Brighton, Lila, and two other men who appeared to be military officers, along with their wives.

"This is Prince Kai," Brighton said to the others, who bowed and curtseyed. He introduced them each to Kaerius, who nodded to them.

It is an honor to meet friends of Brighton and his wife.

Soon the food arrived. Kaerius was delighted to find that the raw fish bites he had so enjoyed at lunch were among the dishes served. One of the other officers passed Kaerius his plate, which the Mer prince accepted with surprise and gratitude.

"You really like that?" the man asked. "It's popular, but I've never cared for it."

It is a taste of home.

"Galbraith arrives tomorrow," said Brighton.

From the following conversation, Kaerius understood that one of the officers had once observed the Severtian court and believed that the

Severtian lord, while of course undeserving of the princess, was probably a better option both politically and personally. He was significantly older than the princess and neither beautiful nor kind, but he was honest. That much could not be said for Ralph.

I am the best option. Kaerius tapped the table to get the man's attention. *I am beautiful, and I will delight in making her happy.*

Brighton raised his eyebrows. "We all want her to be happy," he said.

Lila sighed. "Poor girl. Everyone thinks a crown is something to be desired until they realize the burdens that come with it. I grieve for her."

Chapter 14

Kaerius was left alone for much of the following morning, though he was provided with a breakfast of roasted fish, fried potatoes, and an arrangement of strange green leaves and reddish orange vegetables cut into neat slices. Brighton had told him that Jill would bring him meals and someone would fetch him when it was time for dinner with the Severtian envoy.

The Mer prince spent the morning hours investigating his suite, which he had not fully explored earlier. Since he was alone, he gave many of the items an exploratory lick. Brighton thought it strange, but for Kaerius, it was an efficient way to learn a little more about this strange human world. The soft towels in the bath were fuzzy and vaguely floral, though he didn't know enough about land vegetation to identify the species. They tasted clean and fresh, despite the fluff that dried his tongue. The tabletop had been oiled at some point, which gave the wood a rich gleam. There were books upon a small shelf against one wall, an extravagance that was entirely lost upon him. He did learn that the covers tasted of leather and the paper inside was thin and crinkly and tasted like dust and wood gum. The words were incomprehensible, but he studied them with interest, noting the repetition of letters between words and on different pages.

One book caught his attention. He didn't recognize the subject, but he did see that it contained a series of rough maps of the Elerian coastline. He recognized the coastline immediately, for he had a mental map far more detailed than this, and the sight was like the shock of lightning in the water, electrifying him to his core.

The humans understood their world through maps on paper! The Mer conveyed this information through song, which created a map in the listener's mind. If he could show Marin his home, she might understand who and what he was and what he could offer.

In the meantime, he would prepare himself to defend her against the threat posed by the Boravians and Severtians. Barefoot, he darted back and

forth across the sitting room, practicing moving his feet quickly and keeping his balance in this world of oppressive gravity and no water resistance. He felt fast and light but perpetually off-balance without the water to oppose his movements. His ability to attack from all angles was grievously limited by the press of gravity upon him, so that he could not dart upward or downward at will, protecting his face with his tail.

He rolled his shoulders, imagining some foreign opponent attacking Marin directly and how he would gallantly defend her. Perhaps it was a little silly, but he would rather be prepared to demonstrate his courage and love than unready for whatever might threaten her.

When the sun was overhead, there was a knock on his door. He opened it, barefoot and naked above the waist, to see Jill standing there with a tray of food.

She blinked at him. “Put on a shirt,” she said flatly. “I won’t be seen with some half-clothed foreign lord.”

Kaerius retreated and put on the shirt he’d been wearing earlier. He’d taken it off in the hours alone; the fabric felt strangely dry against his skin, and it was easier to tolerate being chilled than that constant, scratching reminder of how alien he was in this world.

“Aren’t you cold?” Jill set the tray down on the table, and Kaerius deduced from the single plate and cup that he was to dine alone for this meal, too.

He nodded.

She tilted her head. “Your fire is out. Don’t you know how to light it?”

Kaerius shook his head.

Her stern face softened. “I’ll show you. Come.”

So he received a lesson on how to start a fire with the matches on the hearth and instructions on how to keep the fire going once it was lit. He put his hand out to touch the tiny flame, but drew back at Jill’s startled admonition not to burn himself. The heat and light that emanated from the fire enchanted him, and he stared at it in awestruck wonder.

He had seen fire before, but only from a distance, aside from his first night on land, when he had been nearly insensible and hardly able to appreciate its beauty.

“Don’t burn yourself,” Jill said again. “One of Brighton’s young guards will come fetch you for dinner.” She had put yet another new jacket

in a great wooden thing she called a wardrobe, and he would wear that for dinner.

Thank you. He felt gracious and dignified to be so polite to a servant. The pleasure in being gracious startled him. Did he enjoy this so much because he wanted to be gracious in general, or because he appreciated her kindness? He decided that both reasons applied.

"Was that a thank you?" She raised her eyebrows.

He nodded.

"You're welcome."

After eating, when no one knocked on his door, Kaerius paced restlessly around the suite, picking things up and putting them down again. He wanted to teach Marin and Brighton more signs, or ask someone to tell him the words for the many objects he had never seen before. He wanted to ask for explanations. Why did Marin think marrying one of her own people was not a good option? How might he prove himself worthy of her admiration and love? How horrified would she be when she realized his true mouth was full of sharp teeth rather than these strange, flat things? Would she think his tail lovely or merely strange?

He spent a great deal of time peeling small strands of wood off the sections laid ready by the fire and feeding them to the flames one by one. He was sorely tempted to pick up one of the burning embers, just a small one, just to see what it would feel like. It must be like sunlight in one's hand, bright and glorious and alive! What would it taste like? Would it spill light and heat and joy through his bones so that he was as light in the air as he was in the water?

But he merely put his finger closer and closer, slowly, until he could feel the danger of the heat, and pulled away.

At last, as the light was fading, a knock finally came. A dark-haired young man in a uniform stood there. "Prince Kai? I'm here to escort you to dinner."

Just a moment. Kaerius pulled on the stockings and socks and then laced the boots. He pulled on the vest and jacket which had been selected for him and ran a hand through his golden hair. Then he stood before the

young man and smiled, gesturing at himself with a glint of mischief in his eyes.

The youth looked a little confused. “You look quite nice,” he said at last. “Is that what you were asking?”

Kaerius beamed. *Yes, it was, and yes, I do look gorgeous, don’t I?* He gestured toward the hall, indicating he was ready to go.

The stockings and socks on his feet in the new boots were much less painful than the old boots had been, but it was still uncomfortable to walk so far. Kaerius ignored the pain in favor of matching his strides to those of the energetic young soldier.

A few minutes later, the soldier stopped at a set of doors inlaid with fine lines of gold depicting the palace on the rocky seaside cliffs, with a stormy ocean picked out in intricate silver inlay. Kaerius studied the design surreptitiously, admiring the detail and glitter of the precious metals against the smooth, dark wood.

“Here you are, Your Highness,” said the soldier with a bow.

Thank you. Kaerius strode through the doors, seeing Marin, Brighton, and the two foreign lords already within.

Marin rose to greet him, a courtesy that apparently irritated both Ralph and the Severtian lord.

“Prince Kai!” she said, as if delighted.

Your beauty astounds me anew. He bowed elaborately, adding flourishes to the form he had learned so quickly from Brighton.

Marin blushed. “You’ve met Lord Ralph of Boravia already,” she said.

Ralph sneered and gave a resentful half-bow to the silent prince.

“This is Lord Adam Galbraith, of Severt. Lord Galbraith, Prince Kai.” Marin’s voice had a faint edge of concern.

“What an honor to meet you, Prince Kai,” growled Lord Galbraith, as if he were utterly disgusted by Kaerius’s very existence.

Kaerius raised one eyebrow and smiled slowly. He clicked his teeth at Galbraith, and his smile widened when the man’s arrogance flickered for a moment.

The princess nodded to a servant in the corner, who exited the room for a few seconds before returning with a plate of food and fellow servants bearing more plates, glasses, and bottles of wine. The table was easily large enough for twelve people, but apparently only these four were to eat, for Marin indicated that Kaerius was to sit at the opposite end of the table from

her, and the two lords were seated on either side, facing each other. Brighton stood a few feet behind Marin, his hands clasped loosely behind his back in a parade rest position; though Kaerius didn't know the name of this position, he instinctively recognized it as an unthreatening but ready pose. Apparently Brighton was not to eat with them, and Kaerius shot him a questioning glance. The guard nodded acknowledgement but said nothing.

"So Prince Kai, you're from a foreign land across the water." Lord Galbraith's voice was thick with annoyance and contempt. "I suppose you're attempting to make your suit to Her Highness? It must be difficult to convey your meaning without the use of your voice."

Kaerius blinked. *Not as difficult as it would be with your personality.*

Ralph said, "We can't all be as abrasive as you are, Galbraith. I suppose you can get away with it because of your physical charms."

The Severtian lord paled and then flushed, which was particularly unbecoming. Though he was not exactly ugly, he was hardly a specimen of masculine beauty, with a crooked nose, thin lips perpetually in a sneer, thinning hair pulled back from his shiny forehead, and the beginning of a paunch on his thin frame. Seated across from Ralph's smug, handsome face and broad-shouldered strength, he looked petulant and outclassed.

"Well," he said, as if struggling to find words in his fury. "I'm sure Her Highness is wise enough to see through the temporary charms of her other suitors. At least we Severtian nobility are not known for our cruelty to our own subjects."

Ralph smiled serenely. "Ask any of my servants if I am cruel. They will answer that I pay on time and well, and my requirements for service are lighter than those of my countrymen."

"You probably threatened them into saying whatever you want!" snapped Galbraith.

Ralph shrugged one shoulder in careless arrogance. "What of it? Does it matter? It's still true."

The Mer prince had been watching this argument in fascinated horror, and only by chance did he glance at Brighton at just the right moment to see the guard's lips pressed together in subdued fury. In that instant, Kaerius understood Brighton's anger.

These men were obnoxious and ridiculous, and Kaerius would have laughed at them and mocked them in any other situation. But Marin was

trapped, and in less than two months, she would be married to one of these horrible men.

Her face was pale and her lips set in an awkward, uncomfortable half-smile, as if she hoped by her sweetness to influence these foreigners to kindness. “Generosity with one’s resources is certainly admirable, but I would hope that one’s staff would speak of one’s generosity out of their own contentment, not fear.”

Lord Galbraith smiled and stabbed at a bit of steak on his plate with unnecessary violence. “Your discernment is admirable, Your Highness. I’m sure I can make you happy both personally and as a queen. Severt is prepared to make extraordinarily generous trade concessions in order to secure this alliance, but we would not be pleased by Eleria’s choice to ally herself with Boravia.”

Brighton’s jaw tensed, as if this threat were nearly too much to bear, but he made no move or sound.

The Severtian lord glanced at him. “Does the truth bother you, guard? Your princess has more stomach for the truth than you do.”

Marin said, “Don’t insult my guard, or any of my staff, if you want your suit to have any hope at all.”

Lord Ralph took a sip of his wine and sat back. “Now you see the charms of Severt, Your Highness.” He gave a self-satisfied little smirk. “I will leave it to your discretion as to which of our suits is more appealing.”

Kaerius wanted to throttle them both, the detestable Severtian and the smug Boravian. *You are both loathsome. Her Highness is so superior to you that you are incapable of even recognizing how lucky you are to be in her presence, you blind cavefish.*

Brighton stared at him, one eyebrow raised.

Idiots, Kaerius added with emphasis.

Brighton’s lips twitched. He didn’t understand most of the signs, but he had picked up enough to understand that Kaerius was insulting the foreign lords.

“What are you laughing at?” snarled Lord Galbraith.

Brighton’s face stilled into an impassive mask.

“And you!” Galbraith turned to Kaerius and raised his glass. “The mute imbecile! I suppose you think you have something to offer Her Highness?”

Kaerius gave his most gleefully mocking smile and raised his chin. *I am both beautiful and clever. Good luck, idiot.*

Brighton pressed his lips together.

“I think we’ve enjoyed enough of this pleasant conversation,” said Marin quietly. “May we eat in peace for a few minutes, please?”

“As you wish,” said Lord Galbraith with annoyance.

“I am delighted to find that your preferences align with mine, Your Highness,” said Lord Ralph with another smooth smile. “I also prefer silence to the yapping of inferiors.”

Galbraith stabbed his fork into the tabletop so that it stuck in the wood and stood abruptly. “Shall we have a duel, then, Ralph?”

“Sit down,” said Brighton, with his hand on his sword and sudden menace in his voice.

Galbraith might have said something else insulting, but Marin said sharply, “If you cannot eat civilly now, I certainly cannot hope for any alliance to last. Shall we end negotiations now, Galbraith?”

The Severtian said with withering disdain, “Leash your guard dog, or it’s him I’ll be dueling.”

Marin stood, pale and resolute, and said, “Galbraith, I will not ask again. Sit down and eat civilly, or I’ll have your entire party ejected from the city this very night. Threats against my staff will not be tolerated.”

Lord Galbraith rolled his eyes to the ceiling and sighed heavily. “As you wish, Your Highness.”

He sat and glared at Brighton, who kept a hand on the hilt of his sword. With a grunt of disgust, the Severtian yanked his fork from where it had been stuck in the table.

They finished dinner in a tense, unpleasant silence punctuated only by the soft clink of silverware on china.

Finally Marin rose, and her three guests stood in respect. She said, “Good evening, gentlemen. I will see you tomorrow at the dance when I receive the Frintan delegation.” She swept out of the room with Brighton close behind her.

Kaerius wanted to follow her and Brighton, but it made no sense for him to do so; he was thought to be a suitor, not a trusted confidant. Certainly he had no real right to follow her as if they were already a couple. So when she was out of sight, he sat again, presuming upon both his real and presumed rank that he had that privilege.

He watched with some amusement as the two men glared at each other. Seeing that neither of them seemed inclined to say anything that would be of use to the princess, he stood at last.

He nodded to them, a slight courtesy motivated more by his desire to show royal dignity than by any respect for them as individuals.

The same young soldier who had brought him to dinner escorted him through the halls to a set of heavy wooden doors he had not seen before. There were six guards outside, but they nodded him in without protest.

He entered a large private study, where the princess and Brighton were waiting, along with Jill and a young lady who seemed to be a personal servant to Marin.

Kaerius bowed deeply, and when he rose, he noticed another man seated by the fireplace.

He bowed again, realizing that this must be the king, for no one else was seated. The king wore a golden crown upon his head, but Kaerius knew so little about humans that he did not remember at first that this was anything other than a strange human custom, and actually signified the king's status.

The king's eyes were unfocused, but he turned his head toward Kaerius questioningly.

He mumbled something, and Brighton said, "Yes, Your Majesty. Prince Kai, if you would approach the king and kneel, he would like to feel your face."

Kaerius stepped forward, noticing how the king's hands trembled. The man was not very old, but he was apparently quite ill and likely had been for some time.

Marin stood at her father's side with one hand on his thin shoulder. Her gaze followed Kaerius as he stepped closer.

The Mer prince knelt in front of the king, took the king's right hand in his, and guided it to his cheek.

The king's fingers were cold against Kaerius's skin, with the faint rasp of old calluses testifying that he had not always been so infirm. The king's shaking hands swept over the prince's jaw, his lips, his eyelids, his cheekbones, and the long, silky hair that fell over his forehead and ears. His fingers lingered on the knot over Kaerius's ear, and he whispered, "What is this?"

Brighton said, “I hit him, Your Majesty. He was startled from sleep and thought he needed to defend himself from Sir Vincent.” At another questioning noise from the king, the guard added, “His Majesty wishes you to attest that you bear no grudge against me for the wound, Prince Kai.”

Kaerius held the king’s hand against his cheek and shook his head firmly. Then, for good measure, he turned a little so that the king could feel his lips, and he smiled, bright and carefree.

An answering smile ghosted across the king’s pale face, and he sighed. “You smell like the ocean.”

Kaerius blinked. *It is my home.*

The king straightened in his chair and took a deep breath. “I like him,” he said, his voice quiet but unequivocal.

Chapter 15

The king's suite adjoined the princess's, though they both had plenty of space, and all doors to the royal quarters were guarded. Thus no escort was required for the princess when she left through a private door to her own side of the royal suite.

Brighton was therefore free to escort Kaerius back to his suite before returning home.

They walked through a corridor Kaerius had not yet seen, wide and straight, with enormous painted portraits in gilded frames on either side. Kaerius stopped and looked up at one.

The man in the painting was not much older than Kaerius himself. His dark hair curled over his ears, and his lips lifted in the hint of a dignified smile. His left hand rested on the hilt of a sword on his hip.

Kaerius looked at Brighton and raised his eyebrows inquiringly.

"That's Sebastian de Gracey, the king's father, shortly before he was crowned."

The prince tilted his head and studied the young man's face with more interest. He could see a little similarity between the youth and the princess in her jawline and around her eyes. He wondered if someone, looking at Kaerius, would see anything of his father in him.

He closed his eyes for a moment, remembering arguments and cruel words, pride and anger. Perhaps he and his father were more alike than Kaerius had realized.

He turned to look at another painting, trying not to think of his father. The Mer king probably did not even know that Kaerius had bargained with the Lord of the Deep and ventured onto land. He probably thought Kaerius was dead; the prince had never simply vanished before. Kaerius was suddenly ashamed of how he had left his people, left his father, without a word of explanation. In the fury of the moment, he had thought only of his own hope and desire.

His father ruled well, and Kaerius's presence or absence would not harm them.

But he had been selfish not to leave word for his father.

"That's the lost prince," Brighton said quietly.

Kaerius shook himself. *What?*

"The lost prince, Alexander Rafael de Gracey. He disappeared a little over two hundred years ago. His younger brother, Tobias Ulrich de Gracey, ruled in his place, but always maintained that if his brother returned, he would give his brother the crown that rightfully belonged to him. All Elerian kings have followed this tradition." Brighton pointed at another portrait. "That's King Tobias's son King Richard, and his son King Corentin."

Kaerius walked a little farther down the hall, examining the portraits in turn. The clothes and styles of their hair changed in each painting, and he wondered how quickly human fashions changed.

If Marin never loved him, would his people remember him as the Elerians remembered their lost prince?

He laughed to himself, silent and despairing.

"Do you need anything before I leave? How are your feet?"

Can we go outside? Kaerius turned toward the exterior of the palace. *I need to smell the sea.*

"What? You need… smell… water?" Brighton obligingly turned with him.

A few minutes later, they stood with arms leaning upon the wall.

What a horrible mess for Her Highness. The wind off the sea smelled of kelp and salt, of home and freedom, and for a moment, longing pierced the Mer prince's heart so sharply that it brought tears to his eyes.

Clouds scudded across the sky, hiding the full moon and then letting the silver light spill over the empty street. It cast deep shadows against the palace behind them and on the cliffside that fell away before them, and the sea was a dark, seething shadow that rustled and murmured below.

"Do you really love the princess?" said Brighton abruptly.

Kaerius looked at him in surprise. *Yes.*

"I know why our people do, and why I do, and I know you have reasons to be grateful to her. But there's more, isn't there? You look at her like you've loved her for more than the last few days. Why?"

The Mer prince swallowed and hesitated. *When the princess fell into the sea, I found her*, he finally signed.

“Something about the princess in the ocean?” Brighton stared at him. “When?”

Last year.

“Do you mean when the ship capsized and the king was injured?” Brighton’s voice was tight. “Were you there?”

I brought her to shore, and I sang life into her lungs. Kaerius smiled a little to himself as he remembered. It had been a strange moment, face to face with the unconscious princess, with her soft human skin and her dark hair all tangled and full of sand. The Mer folk could take shallow breaths of air, but it did not sustain their life the way water did. He had expelled the water from his lungs, taken a huge breath of air, pressed his lips to hers, and sung of life and hope and courage to live.

She had coughed into his face, curled up, and vomited water and bile all over him. Her eyes were closed against the blinding sunlight, and if she had seen him at all, it could only have been as a dark silhouette against the brilliance.

“Can you breathe?” he’d asked. His own voice was strange in the air, and his lungs burned without the familiar saltwater to fill them. As he inhaled air again, his vision grew a little dimmer.

She’d coughed again and rasped, “Thank you.”

Then there were human voices far too close, and he’d slipped into the water and watched as they had wept over her, wrapped her in warm clothes, and carried her away.

Brighton stared at Kaerius in the shifting silver moonlight. “You saved her life that day, didn’t you? You brought her to shore?”

Yes.

“I always wondered,” Brighton murmured, looking back out at the sea. He leaned his forearms on the wall and sighed. “It never made sense that she lived. She couldn’t swim that far, and she hit the rail before she fell. She always said she couldn’t remember what had happened after she fell.”

Kaerius smiled quietly.

“Thank you,” said the guard sincerely. “I didn’t realize how much we owed you.”

The prince looked at him in surprise. *I am repaid in full by the opportunity to show her my love.*

Brighton gave a soft huff of amusement. “It would be too convenient if you were actually a foreign prince, with whom Her Highness could make an alliance.”

I am a prince of the Mer, and I would be honored by an alliance, but even more honored by her hand in marriage. I love her, not her crown.

Brighton couldn’t see or did not understand these signs in the darkness, for he sighed softly, staring out at the sea as if grieving for the princess and her inevitable misery.

Finally, he said, “My wife is waiting for me.”

I can find my way back. Kaerius glanced up at the taller man. *I would like to listen to the waves, if you don’t mind.*

The sky cleared just then, and Brighton saw the motions clearly. “You want to… listen?”

To the ocean. Kaerius made a shooing motion, adding the sign for gratitude so that it would not be rude. *Go home to your beautiful wife. I am fine.*

Brighton hesitated, and then said, “You can find your way back?”

Kaerius nodded.

The guard pressed his lips together, and then said, “All right. I suppose we can trust you that far. Just don’t go wandering through the palace.”

The Mer prince nodded and watched the guard walk down the steep stone road that curved away down the cliffside. The man had been remarkably kind, once he’d concluded that Kaerius posed no threat to his princess. When Brighton was out of sight, Kaerius turned back to look out over the vast sea, breathing deep of the cold salt wind.

He had underestimated how much he would miss the pressure of water on his skin and the scent of kelp in the water, how his heart would long to sing for the dawn. Silence felt like a kind of death.

He shook himself and strengthened his heart, like the implacable tides. It was only death for a time.

If he could save Marin from her suitors, if he could show her his beauty and the strength of his love, he would regain his voice. He must not fade like foam on the sand.

A sharp cry sounded from below, and he turned toward it.

There was no other sound, and Kaerius wondered whether perhaps it was merely a cry of surprise rather than distress.

The Mer prince slipped to the other side of the street and crouched in the darkness, his hunting instincts telling him that he would be silhouetted against the moon if someone lower down the slope were to look in his direction. He had probably already been seen, but he should not make it easy for them to know where he was.

He walked down the slope as quietly as he could, searching the darkness for any indication of what was going on.

He had nearly reached the bottom of the cliff, where the road joined with the other street on which Brighton lived, when he caught the scent of blood.

His nostrils flared, trying to pinpoint the source. The wind came over the wall from the sea, and at last, when he heard nothing, he crossed back to the wall and looked over it.

With the moon behind Kaerius, the cliffside below was in deep shadow, but the scent of blood was a little stronger. Kaerius looked around and, seeing no immediate threat, clambered over the stone wall.

His feet slipped on the stones, and the rough rocks scraped the skin from his fingertips. He paused, finding the scent again, and climbed a little farther down until his feet came to rest upon a narrow stone ledge.

Even his sharp eyes could not make out the identity of the body he had found, but he could hear faint breathing, so he knew the man wasn’t dead. He crouched close to take in a deeper breath and grimaced.

Lord Galbraith lay upon the stone ledge, bleeding from head and shoulder, unconscious and helpless. His sword had not been drawn before he fell, and the only indication that he had attempted to defend himself at all was a scrap of cloth in his hand.

Kaerius carefully stepped over the Severtian lord’s torso to investigate this more closely. It was so dark that it was impossible to see the color, but the scent of it was familiar.

The cloth was torn from Brighton’s jacket.

Kaerius straightened, puzzled and uneasy, and then bent closer to lick the cloth.

Ah. That made more sense. The cloth was from Brighton’s jacket, but there was the faint, unmistakable tang of Lord Ralph upon the fabric.

Of course Brighton would not attack the obnoxious Severtian lord; he might despise him, but he would never attack a foreign lord and throw him over the cliff wall like a piece of garbage to be disposed of. It was

something of a miracle that Galbraith had landed upon this ledge; it was barely wide enough to support a body, and was not easily visible from the street.

Besides, if Brighton meant to kill a man, he would do it face to face, in broad daylight, and he would leave the man thoroughly dead, not wounded and helpless. He would not throw a wounded man, however detestable, over the cliff to die in a fall.

Ralph, however, was exactly the sort of man who would attempt to place the blame on another man for his own despicable crime.

Kaerius licked Galbraith's shoulder and was unsurprised to taste the Boravian lord's hands in several places, along with several other human scents. Perhaps those were Ralph's allies in the assault, or perhaps they were Galbraith's servants and staff who had prepared his clothes. Kaerius had not been close enough to any of them to identify their scents clearly.

Galbraith's breathing shifted subtly, and Kaerius patted him softly on the cheek to see if he would wake.

The man groaned. It was an oddly vulnerable sound from such an abominable man, and Kaerius hissed between his teeth. He had been almost tempted to shove the Severtian off this narrow ledge to his death, but such an action would not serve the princess. Besides, the sound grated on his nerves. It would be dishonorable indeed to kill Galbraith while he was helpless.

So he patted Galbraith's cheek again and waited for long minutes while the man moaned and muttered his way back to coherence.

"Who are you?" Galbraith grunted at last.

Kaerius clicked his teeth.

"The mute idiot," Galbraith muttered. "Threw me down here to kill me? You'll have to do better than that." He swung a fist at Kaerius's face, and the Mer prince avoided the weak blow with ease.

He clicked his teeth again. *I'm trying to help you, idiot.* He guided Galbraith's hand to the edge and let him feel the sea air rushing up from below. Then he slipped his hand under Galbraith's shoulder.

The man curled onto his side, then pushed up to hands and knees. "Are you trying to help?" he muttered, when he finally realized that Kaerius's strong hands upon his shoulders were steadying him rather than causing further harm.

Kaerius gripped Galbraith's hand and put it on his own face so the lord could feel his nod. Then he pointed up the short, rough cliffside to the road.

"You want me to climb?" Galbraith said in disbelief. "Did you forget that I was nearly killed just now? I can barely keep my feet!"

Kaerius gripped the shoulder of the Severtian's jacket and lifted him off his feet with one hand, hoping the arrogant lord would see this as the reassurance it was. The Mer prince was strong enough to support him if he would only make an effort.

Galbraith sighed heavily and sagged against the cliffside. "All right," he muttered, dark and hopeless. "If I die, I die."

Perhaps the man's pessimism was not entirely unfounded, for he slipped more than once as they made their way slowly up the steep cliff. The climb back to the wall was not even twenty feet, but he would have fallen to his death at least twice if not for Kaerius's iron grip upon his jacket which gave him enough support to find his footing again.

The man collapsed facedown atop the wall and lay there, winded and groaning, as Kaerius climbed over. The Mer prince gripped his shoulders again and helped him the rest of the way over the wall. He hauled Galbraith upright, and they made their way across the street to one of the palace doors.

The palace doors here were guarded on the inside and locked, but no guards stood outside. Farther down the hill, the access to the road and palace were restricted, so they were effectively within protected grounds already.

Kaerius pounded upon the door and waited. A faint uneasiness played upon his mind, but when he looked behind him, he could see nothing alarming. Galbraith leaned more heavily upon him. The prince pounded his fist on the door again.

At last, someone began to unlock it, and several minutes later, they were surrounded by lantern light, guards, servants, and helpful hands.

A dozen people asked questions at once, and all Galbraith could say was that he'd been walking on the road alone, and he'd seen Brighton, and then he'd been hit upon the head and remembered nothing else until the mute idiot prince had helped him up the cliffside. His gratitude toward Kaerius did not apparently extend far enough to prevent him from calling the prince an imbecile, but there was less rancor behind the insult.

Soon the princess and others joined them, having been told of the commotion.

Kaerius followed the commotion, noting how Sir Vincent treated even Galbraith with unsentimental, professional compassion. The physician ignored the man's irritable grumbling and complaining while conducting a thorough examination.

"Captain Brighton would not have attacked you," said Marin.

Someone said, "Where is the captain? If he knew Galbraith was attacked, he would be here."

Marin looked around, frowning. "I assume he went home. Lieutenant, would you confirm Captain Brighton made it home safely?"

Several young soldiers bowed and hurried away, leaving Marin with a number of guards and the Severtian lord, who continued grumbling bitterly. Kaerius did not want to leave her with the attacker unidentified.

The princess sent a servant for Galbraith's personal servant. Then she had several of the soldiers help Galbraith to a small sitting room on the same level of the palace. This seemed particularly thoughtful to Kaerius; climbing five flights of stairs would be miserable in Galbraith's current state.

Kaerius couldn't help smiling a little as he admired her. Her sweetness slipped past what little guardedness had remained in his heart, and he gave himself up to her entirely without even realizing it.

"Your Highness!" one of the young soldiers stepped into the room. "Mrs. Brighton said the captain had not come home yet."

Marin's eyes widened. "I assume you've started searching for him."

"Yes, Your Highness." The soldier bowed sharply. "Someone stayed with Mrs. Brighton to send word back in case he arrived late."

"Thank you." The princess eyed Galbraith, who was sitting with his head in his hands, apparently dazed enough that he did not react to this. Perhaps he had not heard or understood it at all.

Kaerius waved to get her attention. *I will join the search, if you trust these men.* He indicated the soldiers with her. Brighton had seemed to trust them.

"You want to go look for him?" Marin nodded, her face pale. "Yes, please."

Kaerius bowed deeply and set off through the corridors. Soon he was back outside on the moonlit street. The night was still cold, and the wind

cut through his jacket to chill the sweat upon his skin.

He strode carefully through the darkness, his senses as alert as they had been when he had first approached the Lord of the Deep. He smelled no blood, but there was an odd sense that he was not alone.

The Mer prince stopped and sniffed, ignoring the salt and kelp, the fish and urchin and gull. He listened for breaths beneath the sound of the wind, and at last, he looked toward a shadow some distance away. It was a little nook in front of one of the palace doors, with a roof and walls to protect those awaiting entrance from the worst of the wind.

There, in the deepest shadow, he found Brighton sprawled upon the stones, barely breathing.

Chapter 16

Kaerius dropped to his knees and sniffed at his friend's face and neck. The guard smelled of the salt wind in his hair and the soap his wife used to wash their clothes, the smoke of the lanterns and the almost imperceptible memory of herbs used in the meal he had watched the princess and her guests eat.

Ralph's hands had been all over Brighton's jacket; Ralph had gripped his collar, under his arm, on his shoulder, and upon the front, where a fist-sized piece had been ripped off. No, at least some of it had been cut, though the edges had been frayed to look as if it had been ripped. A human hand would struggle to rip cloth this sturdy.

What Kaerius could *not* sense was any hint that Brighton had touched Lord Galbraith. There was no scent of Galbraith upon Brighton's clothes or on his hands.

Kaerius hissed between his teeth, looking over his shoulder. Ralph had not been in the little crowd that had gathered before he had left the princess, but he did not want to leave her without protection. But he could not leave Brighton here, either, and he was not sure how badly his friend was injured.

Kaerius pounded on the door several times, but at last concluded that no one could hear him. He could run back to the other door and get help, but it might be best to hear what Brighton could say when he woke without the added complication of an audience, some of whom might not be trustworthy.

He patted Brighton on the cheek gently, unwilling to move him until he knew that Brighton's back or neck were not broken.

The guard did not wake for several minutes, and Kaerius shivered in the icy wind. Nevertheless he did not push Brighton to wake before he was able.

At last the guard mumbled something, and Kaerius patted his cheek again to let him know he was not alone.

“Kai?”

Kaerius clicked his teeth, though he hoped the sound conveyed reassurance rather than threat.

For several more minutes, Brighton seemed to be drifting in and out of consciousness. He turned on his side but made no effort to get up. Finally he vomited, and the sound made Kaerius feel a little sick himself. At last, when he attempted to rise, Kaerius helped him up with careful hands, moving slowly so that Brighton could let him know of any injury. At last Brighton managed to sit slumped against the wall, leaning heavily on Kaerius.

“The princess,” he said at last.

Kaerius nodded.

“Help me up,” the guard said thickly, and then he heaved again, though his stomach was empty.

For another few minutes, Kaerius sat beside the guard, his arms keeping his friend mostly upright. Brighton’s head sagged against him, and the guard’s dark curls were in his face, smelling of soap and the salt breeze and the slightest hint of blood.

When Brighton mumbled, “Help me up,” again, Kaerius did so. He wrapped one arm around the larger man’s waist and took Brighton’s weight as the guard listed to one side.

He helped Brighton up the hill to the door he had entered before and found to his dismay that it was locked again. He pounded his fist on the heavy wood. Brighton flinched at the noise, but he made no complaint.

At long last, the door was opened, and a confusion of guards and servants received them with exclamations of dismay and horror.

“Where is the princess?” croaked Brighton.

“She is in the meeting hall with Lord Galbraith,” said one of the guards. “What happened?”

“I need to see her,” Brighton said.

One of the young guards joined Kaerius in supporting the guard, and together they made their way up three flights of stairs and down the many long hallways to the meeting room.

“Thanks, Hartley,” Brighton managed.

The guard notified the princess who it was, and a moment later they were admitted.

Lord Galbraith was standing before the princess, who sat behind a heavy desk. Two other guards, including Lt. Sanders, stood behind her, and Kaerius was relieved to know that she had not faced Lord Galbraith alone. Sir Vincent was not present, but Kaerius hoped he would return soon.

At their entrance, the Severtian turned and snarled, “There he is!”

Brighton looked immediately at the princess. “Are you hurt, Your Highness?” he said.

“No.” The princess approached, her eyes sweeping over him. “What happened?”

Brighton sagged more heavily against Kaerius, who pointed at a chair with an inquiring look.

“Of course. Please sit down, Brighton.” The princess hurried to pull the chair out from the wall. Lord Galbraith looked on in frustrated anger as Kaerius, assisted by the young, helped lower Brighton into it as gently as possible.

“Your guard,” said Lord Galbraith, with his voice full of fury, “assaulted me, stabbed me in the shoulder, and threw me over the cliff. He should be executed at once!”

Kaerius’s nostrils flared. *You idiot! Besides the fact that Brighton would never do such a thing, how would he have been so badly wounded if he were the culprit? It was obviously Ralph.*

Brighton merely stared dully at the foreign lord. “What?” he said at last.

“The last thing I remember is that man running toward me!” Galbraith stabbed a finger in Brighton’s direction. “The moonlight caught his face; I saw him clearly. Then the pain in my shoulder and the fall, and I thought I would die there, on the rocks of your horrible salt-crusted village.”

The princess said, in hot anger, “If Brighton attacked you, then he had good reason to, and if he didn’t, your accusations are the most shocking slander I’ve ever heard!”

“Brighton is his name? Well, I will challenge him to a duel if it will convince you my words are not mere slander.” Lord Galbraith’s hands were shaking with rage and his own lingering shock.

Kaerius stood, feeling cold and hot in succession. *No. I didn’t save your life so you could kill my friend. Sit down and shut your lying mouth before I rip out your throat.*

“What is he saying?” snapped Galbraith. “Does anyone understand the idiot prince?”

Kaerius stalked over to Galbraith, pointed at his wounded shoulder and then at Brighton, and shook his head firmly. *Brighton didn’t attack you, you stupid blobfish! He’s far too honorable and far too competent to leave an enemy as you were left. Besides, you smell like Ralph, and so does he.*

“What was that sign again?” the princess asked suddenly.

Ralph. Kaerius turned so that she and Brighton could see his hands clearly. *Ralph attacked both Galbraith and Brighton.*

“Are you sure?” Marin whispered.

As sure as death.

The young guard by Brighton’s shoulder kept his hand on his sword.

“What do you remember, Brighton?” asked the princess.

A taut silence followed these words. Brighton’s steely blue eyes were a little unfocused as he looked toward Galbraith.

“I don’t… I don’t remember,” he said at last.

“He’s lying!” snapped Galbraith. “I defended myself, and that’s why he’s in that state.”

Brighton closed his eyes and winced. He slouched in the chair, as if he could not stay upright, and the posture looked unnatural to him.

Marin said quietly, “If you defended yourself well enough to put him in this state, how did you end up thrown over the wall? And if he threw you over the wall, then how did he come to be in this state afterwards? Even if you saw him, I cannot see how you can blame him for everything.”

The Severtian lord braced one shaking hand on the desk. “Then who was it? I saw an Elerian uniform and his face, and the darkness, and then there was pain in my shoulder. A dagger, I think. You see the blood here!” He gestured at his wounded shoulder.

The injury did not appear serious, in Kaerius’s opinion; the blood stain had not grown larger since he had found the man on the ledge. He tried not to sneer at the man for his whining. Scorning the Severtian’s gutless, cowardly moaning would not help the princess address the real threat.

Marin said, “Brighton, if I may?” and stepped closer. With steady fingers, she unsheathed Brighton’s dagger that he kept on his hip and examined the blade. “It is perfectly clean.”

“And the cloth ripped from the front of his jacket?” Galbraith said acidly. “I suppose you have an excuse for that?”

Kaerius put out his hand, and the Severtian held out the piece of fabric. Kaerius indicated the edges and pantomimed cutting it with a knife.

"You're saying it was planted evidence?" Galbraith's voice cracked. "For what purpose? If I was the target, why plant evidence on him? He's not even important."

Marin said sharply, "He is important to me! He is an honorable soldier, a trusted confidant, a childhood friend, and a dearly loved cousin. I will not, I cannot, believe that he acted so out of character. It makes no sense."

The Severtian's gaze flicked to Brighton, who still sat with his eyes closed.

Kaerius put a hand on Brighton's shoulder and then carefully, gently, pushed his hair aside to look for any external sign of injury. He could find no obvious sign of the blow, but Brighton flinched a little when his fingertips brushed an area on the back of his head.

"Why would you attack me?" Galbraith said at last, his voice suddenly wavering.

It isn't as if you've made yourself pleasant. Kaerius scowled. *But look! You couldn't rip his jacket if you tried.* The fabric of his own jacket was similar, and he stepped forward, indicating his shoulder.

"What do you want?" Galbraith looked him up and down, as if remembering suddenly that the silent prince had saved his life. "You don't think the guard did it, do you?"

Kaerius shook his head. He pantomimed ripping the piece of cloth off of Brighton's jacket, and then offered his own lapel for Galbraith to attempt to duplicate this feat.

The Severtian pulled experimentally on the cloth, finally accepting that it was nearly impossible to simply rip a piece out of it.

Seeing the reluctant understanding in Galbraith's eyes, Kaerius turned to the princess.

The physician should see Brighton. He is not himself. I fear he is in pain.

Marin bit her lip, clearly not understanding much of this, but she looked back at her cousin. She said, "Is Sir Vincent back yet?" to the young guard, who stepped to the door to inquire about the physician. Then she knelt at Brighton's side, an unusual display in front of a foreign lord, but everything about the evening seemed unusual. "Can you remember anything else?" she said gently.

Brighton mumbled, “I’m sorry. I… it’s hard to think.” He took an unsteady breath. “Would you bring Lila here? I…” Then he pressed his lips together and took several deep, slow breaths, as if he were fighting nausea. “I don’t want her home alone,” he said at last.

“Of course,” said Marin.

Kaerius watched this exchange and watched Galbraith observing it, noting the older man’s lips twisted as several uncomfortable, unpleasant emotions tangled together.

At last, Galbraith said, “Well, if your guard truly didn’t attack me, then I offer the sympathy of the Severtian crown for the injury of an honorable man, and the gratitude of the crown for the help of the idiot prince in helping me escape from the predicament in which I found myself.”

You didn’t find yourself there, signed Kaerius. *I found you.* But he bowed with a sharp smile, because he thought that receiving this reluctant courtesy with regal dignity would reflect better on both him and Marin than insulting Galbraith in a way he would understand.

Within a few minutes, Marin had dispatched a squad of soldiers to Brighton’s house to fetch Lila, and Sir Vincent had arrived and begun his examination by asking Brighton questions about what he remembered.

Marin said, “If you can walk just a little, we can get you into a bed in the royal quarters.”

“I can walk,” Brighton said. Kaerius and Hartley helped him stand, and he got almost upright before he retched and nearly fell. Kaerius wrapped his arms around the larger man and steadied him.

“I can walk,” Brighton gasped again. “It’s not that far.” So with support from Kaerius and the younger guard, he followed Sir Vincent and the princess just a short distance down the hall and into the royal suite.

“In here,” said the princess, indicating a room just off the first antechamber. “I’ll wait outside.”

“I’ll stay, if it’s all right with you, sir,” said Hartley.

Brighton mumbled something that sounded vaguely affirmative, and Kaerius determined he would stay too.

“Can you get undressed, sir? We’ll help you into the bed. You don’t need to be standing for this,” the physician said. “Hold onto my shoulders and I’ll help you with the buttons.”

“Thanks,” Brighton breathed, and he put both hands on the older man’s shoulders and closed his eyes while the physician helped him undress. The guard flipped the blankets back while Sir Vincent and Kaerius helped Brighton onto the bed.

When the young guard was about to pull the blankets up, the physician said, “Leave the blankets off for now. I need to see everything.”

Kaerius pointed at several fading bruises on Brighton’s upper arms and a newer, darker bruise on his right outer thigh.

“Probably from training; he spars with his men every morning. These are days old, and this one probably from yesterday.” Sir Vincent dismissed these with little concern. “I don’t see any injuries on his body to be concerned about. Sir, can you turn so I can see the back of your head?”

Brighton grunted softly but did not otherwise respond.

Sir Vincent said more sharply, “Wake up!”

The guard grunted again, but seemed no more alert than before.

The physician cursed softly under his breath, pulled something from an inside pocket of his jacket, and then put a vial under Brighton’s nose.

Brighton groaned in more emphatic protest, but he did not answer any of Sir Vincent’s questions. The physician supported Brighton’s head and instructed Kaerius on how to turn the man over with a minimum of jostling, and then examined the back of Brighton’s head with careful fingers.

Finally he said, “Captain Brighton, can you hear me?”

Brighton didn’t even twitch, and Sir Vincent sighed.

Will he live?

“What?” The physician looked at Kaerius. “Are you asking about him?”

Kaerius nodded.

“I ought to tell Her Highness first.” Sir Vincent stood and pulled a blanket over his patient, tucking it in carefully around his body.

When he opened the door, he said, “Your Highness…”

At that moment, Brighton’s wife Lila rushed in from the hall. She looked at Sir Vincent with wide eyes. “Where is he?”

They followed the physician to Brighton’s bedside, and Lila knelt before her husband and kissed his cheek. “What happened?”

Chapter 17

The young guard was eventually ushered back out to the hallway to take a position at the door with his fellow soldiers, having been told in no uncertain terms that he was not to give any information about Brighton's injury to anyone, especially not to any of the foreign servants or diplomats.

Sir Vincent said, "If his condition worsens, alert me at once."

"What will you do?" Lila's lips trembled, and she pressed them together. "What are our options if he gets worse overnight?"

The physician swallowed and looked down. "There isn't much I can do," he admitted in a low voice. "Head injuries are always chancy, and there's very little we can do other than wait and see."

Lila nodded once, her face pale.

Sir Vincent indicated that Kaerius should precede him out of the room, and the Mer prince complied.

May I stay? He looked at Marin.

"What does that mean?"

Kaerius signed *sleep* and pointed at the floor outside Brighton's room, where he would be able to both guard Marin's private quarters and know immediately if Lila called for help.

"You want to sleep there?" Marin swallowed. "It isn't… well, it isn't proper."

Kaerius bowed deeply. *Please. I mean only to protect you and to help Brighton, if I can.*

Marin looked at the physician. "Take an escort when you return to your quarters. I don't trust everyone in the palace."

"Are you letting him stay?" Sir Vincent said in surprise.

The princess bit her lip and fixed her eyes on Kaerius's face. "I am choosing to trust him," she said at last. "Brighton does, and I find I want to rely on his judgement even when he is not able to protect me himself."

Thank you. Kaerius bowed again.

Sir Vincent left, taking one of the guards to escort him as the princess had instructed.

Several maidservants brought out blankets to make a pallet upon the floor for Kaerius. The Mer prince did not realize what they were doing had anything to do with him until one of them curtsied to him with a sweet, admiring smile. Then the servants retreated to the princess's quarters to wait for her.

"Thank you for your concern, Prince Kai," said Marin. She smiled a little tremulously at him, as if she wanted to weep but didn't feel she ought to.

Kaerius's heart thudded in his chest. *I am grieved that Brighton is injured, but I am grateful that you see enough of my heart to trust me this much. I love you. I have for years.*

"What are you… does that mean love?" Marin said, her cheeks flushing pink.

Yes. Kaerius smiled, feeling oddly shy. *I love you*.

"You love me?" Marin asked.

Yes. He held out one hand as if asking her to dance.

Her cheeks grew pinker. "I shouldn't," she murmured.

Why not? He would have signed something flippant, but he remembered Brighton lying unconscious, and the very real dilemma the princess faced, and he smiled a little, hoping she would see how he let his smile soften, how his gaze was open and vulnerable, not bright and sharp. Then he waited with one hand outstretched, letting her decide whether she would give him this gift of time and trust, the gift of her hand in his.

She swallowed. "Do you really love me?" she said. "Are you sure you don't just want my kingdom, like the others?" She smiled a little, as if it were a joke, but there was a real question in her eyes.

He stepped closer, slowly, giving her time to pull away if she wanted. Gently, he took her hand and put it flat upon his breast, letting her feel how his heart thundered.

Marin looked up at him, startled. Slowly, carefully, he drew her into the dancing position, and when she sighed a little and relaxed, he began to lead her around the room.

There was no music, but he imagined the rhythm, and with his gaze on her face, he didn't mind the lingering pain in his feet or the fatigue of the day.

Finally she stopped, and he followed her lead in this.

"I can't marry you, Kai," she said, her eyes firmly fixed on his lips, as if she did not want to meet his gaze at all. "I don't want to lead you on. I am trapped by political considerations, and I am not free to choose my husband for love, even if I were impulsive enough to think I loved you already. Which would be precipitous, of course."

He bent his neck just a little, so that he could meet her eyes, and she looked away.

Why? She should know that sign, because they'd used it that evening with Brighton.

"Why? Why what?"

Why are you trapped? He would have said it differently, but she didn't know those words, and he hoped she might understand these signs.

She closed her eyes and bit back a sob. "I don't want to marry either of those horrible men," she whispered.

Marry me. He dropped to one knee before her, not out of any understanding of the body language of humans, but because he knew the light would fall on his face and show his sincerity most clearly, so that she would see the truth and love in his eyes. He pantomimed giving her his heart again.

"If I could, I would!" she said in a broken whisper. "I don't… I know I don't love you yet, but I think I could, with time. But my people need the trade route south, and Boravia has already threatened invasion if I don't marry Ralph."

Invasion by sea! Not likely. Then, with deliberate clarity, he signed, *I would be honored to be your partner in protecting your people.*

"You would…" Her teeth worried her lower lip.

Protect your people. And protect you, my beloved.

She covered her mouth with one hand, searching his face. "Thank you," she said at last. "You've been very kind." She took a deep breath, opened her mouth as if she wanted to say something else, and then pressed her lips together.

You are tired, Your Highness. He hoped she saw the sincerity and hope in his expression. *Rest well tonight.* He bowed his head.

"Thank you, Kai."

She hurried into the inner rooms and locked the door behind herself.

The spacious vestibule in which Kaerius slept had no external walls and no windows, and thus with the doors closed, it had no natural light. He slept deeply, untroubled by the lingering headache or the fading ache in his chest.

At the sound of the door to Brighton's room opening, the Mer prince woke with a start.

"Prince Kai?" Lila held up a lamp, and the light splashed across his face. When she saw him squinting up at her, she said, "He's asking for Her Highness. You can go in to him, if you want, while I let her know."

Kaerius shot to his feet, all drowsiness gone. Lila motioned him in to the room and continued to the door to the princess's private quarters.

A lantern on the bedside table was lit, so Kaerius could see that Brighton lay on his side. His eyes were surrounded by deep purple bruises.

Kaerius knelt so that he and the guard were at eye level and touched his friend's shoulder softly.

"Kai," said Brighton, and he slitted his eyes open for just a moment before closing them again. "Thank you for coming."

The prince's heart twisted inside him. He put his hand on Brighton's shoulder again, as if the touch could offer some comfort.

The guard apparently took it as a question, for he said, still with his eyes closed, "I won't be much use today. Her Highness receives the Frintan delegation this evening."

The princess hurried into the room just then, and Kaerius reluctantly moved to one side so she could face Brighton directly. "I'm here," said Marin. "How are you feeling?"

Brighton snorted softly without opening his eyes. "The words I'd use aren't appropriate for your ears, Marin. I'll be fine in a few days."

Lila bit her lip but said nothing.

The princess said, "I'm sure, but I expect you to rest and heal in the meantime. That is an order, Captain."

The guard sighed and swallowed, wincing. "Whitaker and Rogers can stand in for me as security. Keep them with you at all times when you're outside your quarters. The guard rotation for your quarters is already set."

He stopped and took several slow breaths before continuing. "Prince Kai will need to stay with you at the dance tonight."

Marin's voice cracked. "I can't imagine dancing when I'm worried about you."

"Didn't you say you'd informed the Frintan delegation that there would be a dance?" Brighton opened his eyes, squinting as if the lamplight was painful.

"I can cancel it."

"Don't be ridiculous," Brighton said. "There's no reason to insult Frinta over me. Did security find anything?"

"They haven't reported yet." Marin frowned.

"I need to talk to Whitaker."

"He's on his way," said Lila.

The morning that followed was a strange, tense time of waiting. Brighton's subordinates came to receive orders and then went away again. Sir Vincent came and pronounced him much improved, but still in considerable danger if he over-exerted himself. He was advised in no uncertain terms to sleep and rest, preferably in the dark as much as possible, to give his brain a chance to recover. He was not to read for at least three weeks, but he was allowed to listen to quiet music.

When Marin retreated into the outer room, Kaerius followed her.

What can I do to help?

She bit her lip and looked at him. "I don't know what you're saying," she said, her expression troubled. "But I wasn't imagining it when you said Ralph was the one who attacked Brighton. Was I?"

It was Ralph. Have your staff confronted him?

"Brighton thinks it best to have more evidence before we detain him for trial. How can you be sure it was him?"

Kaerius flicked the tip of his tongue out. *I tasted him on both Brighton's and Galbraith's jackets.*

"You could taste his touch?"

Kaerius nodded.

Marin frowned more deeply. "That's not enough evidence to convict him, even if Brighton and I believe you."

The Mer prince studied her face and wished he could comfort her. *I will be glad to protect you from him this evening.*

Marin said, “What sort of people do you come from to taste a person’s touch?” Her small, white teeth worried her lower lip, and she said hesitantly, “I suppose that’s related to why you licked me.”

Kaerius nodded. *I am the prince of the Mer. I have risked much to show my love here on land, in your world. I do not desire your kingdom, but I do hope to earn your love.*

“That was the sign for love again, wasn’t it?” Marin took a shaky breath.

Kaerius smiled, sweet and hopeful. *Yes. I love you.*

“I’m sorry,” Marin whispered.

Chapter 18

One of the guards escorted Kaerius back to his suite, where he was given another new outfit, this one of a green-blue fabric with pale gold trim on the cuffs. The white shirt was exquisitely soft against his skin, and it had a luster like pearls. He dressed carefully, tucking the shirt in neatly and smoothing the fabric down before he buttoned the trousers. He buckled the belt, which was embossed with designs of shells.

He combed his hair and examined himself in the mirror. The fabric might have been chosen especially to set off his eyes, and he smiled appreciatively. Perhaps he looked a little pale, but it might have only been the cool light coming through the window. He turned and looked over his shoulder to see what he looked like from behind, as well as he could. His hair looked especially bright against the fabric, nearly the same color as the embroidery at his cuffs, and it fell in soft waves against his collar.

He grinned fiercely. Perhaps Marin would let him kill Ralph tonight! He would save both Marin from a disastrous marriage and her country from miserable subjugation by a nation of horrible men just like Ralph.

At last, Lt. Sanders knocked on his door to escort him to the ballroom.

“You look sharp, Your Highness,” said Sanders, with a glint in his eye.

I do, don’t I? Kaerius grinned. *How is Brighton?*

“I don’t know what that means. But I heard you found the captain, and we all appreciate your aid to him.”

He is a good man.

At the door to the ballroom, Kaerius nodded at the servant who would announce him.

“His Royal Highness Prince Kai,” the man boomed.

Kaerius strode in, looking for Marin. But she wasn’t there yet, so he nodded to the various noblemen who bowed to him and to the tittering little groups of young ladies who blushed and smiled at him and to the guards stationed around the edges of the room.

Only a few moments later, the servant announced, “Her Royal Highness Princess Marin de Gracey.”

Marin swept in with gracious smiles for her friends and acquaintances.

“Oh! Prince Kai,” she said, for Kaerius was already there in front of her, bowing and offering her his hand.

Dance with me?

“The dancing music hasn’t started yet,” she said under her breath.

His smile deepened, and he caught her hand lightly, so that she could pull away if she wanted to. Then they were dancing in front of everyone, and the musicians in the corner belatedly changed their tune to something more energetic.

“Lord Hugh Ralph, of Boravia,” intoned the servant at the door.

Kaerius kept his eyes on Marin’s lovely face while he spun her twice more.

She stopped, and he reluctantly stopped with her, still holding her hand.

Ralph approached. “Your Highness,” he said with a smile.

“Lord Ralph.” She eyed him.

“You are lovely as usual this evening,” Ralph said.

I don’t like your smug face.

Ralph’s eyebrows rose. “Are you insulting me, Prince Kai?” he asked, his voice a little too innocent.

Kaerius smiled with a glitter of hostility in his eyes. *I’m glad you understood that much, you contemptible murderous scoundrel.*

“I suppose your little issue of having no voice is a boon for the rest of us. I hesitate to imagine how obnoxious you would be if you could speak.”

Marin said sharply, “Lord Ralph, your unkindness does not incline me to you in the least. I would think you would want to show your best side while in Eleria.”

The Boravian lord gave a forced smile. “Surely you aren’t actually enjoying the idiot prince’s company? Dance with me, Your Highness.” He took Marin’s hand and pulled her toward himself.

The princess drew her hand back and said, “Lord Ralph, I require civility toward both my staff and my guests. Is that too much to ask of you?”

Ralph’s smile vanished. “I don’t see why you should honor him with your attention at all. He can’t even tell you how lovely you are.”

The servant at the door boomed, “His Grace Duke Glen Lovelock of Frinta!”

Marin raised her chin and looked toward the door.

A blond young nobleman strode in with his head high. He looked toward Marin immediately and bowed, then approached. “Your Highness,” he said, bowing again. “It is an honor and a delight to meet you at last.”

Kaerius frowned. *You had better not get any ideas. I’m going to win her heart. Just because you’re pretty doesn’t mean you have a real chance.*

The duke glanced at him and smiled politely. “Glen Lovelock, Duke of Farhallow in Frinta.” He waited with eyebrows raised for Kaerius to introduce himself.

Prince Kaerius of the Mer of the Northern Seas. They call me Prince Kai.

Ralph, apparently not willing to embarrass himself by forsaking proper courtesy entirely, said, “That is Prince Kai, of… I don’t know where he is from. Some backwater, I imagine. He doesn’t speak, but he uses these hand gestures no one understands.” His eyes gleamed with hostility as he smiled at Kaerius. Then he turned back to the young duke. “I am Lord Hugh Ralph, Earl of Maissione in Boravia.”

Lovelock said, “Thank you, Ralph.” He smiled politely. “Your Highness, might I have the next dance?” He turned a sweet expression toward her, as if utterly oblivious to Ralph’s annoyance.

Kaerius’s gut twisted in dismay when the princess smiled back.

“I shall dance with Prince Kai next, and then Lord Ralph, and then you, if you please,” Marin said.

The Mer prince nearly breathed a sigh of relief, and he whirled her into the next dance without delay. He could not take his eyes from her face, and he wished he could speak to her. Could she see his sincerity and the depth of his devotion in his eyes? If she knew what he had risked for this chance to be near her, to show her his love, would she be charmed?

When the dance ended, he bent closer and put his cheek nearly beside hers for a moment. Perhaps it was scandalous. But he could not whisper into her ear, could not tell her what he wanted to say.

She took a quick, startled little breath, and she didn’t pull away.

Then Ralph’s detestable voice said, “I believe it is my turn, Prince Kai.”

Kaerius watched with narrowed eyes while the lord spun Marin around. Every motion was correct, but the Boravian's expression was anything but kind and sweet. His handsome face was haughty and annoyed, and he looked at Marin as if he possessed her already. Kaerius felt himself nearly trembling with fury.

"Prince Kai," the young Frintan lord said from beside him.

Kaerius spared him a quick, scornful glance.

"I take it from your expression you intend to win Her Highness's hand."

Indeed I do.

"Well, I thought, since there is clearly a great deal of tension between you and Lord Ralph over the princess, that I ought to tell you that you have no reason to dislike me with similar intensity. I am betrothed to a lady in my own lands, whom I have loved for several years, and our wedding will be only a few weeks after my return from Eleria. Princess Marin is lovely, but you will face no competition from me. I was sent here merely as a diplomat, not a suitor."

Kaerius blinked and looked at him again, taking in the young man's trim, elegant figure and his easygoing smile. *You are by far the most compelling of the candidates, other than myself. Are you telling the truth or trying to sneak into her affections by deception?*

"I'm sorry. I don't understand." The duke smiled in a self-deprecating way, revealing dimples that looked all too endearing. "Where are you from, Your Highness?"

Kaerius pointed in the direction of the open ocean. Half his attention was on the duke, but the other half was always on Marin. The duke said something conversational and pleasant, but Kaerius wasn't really listening.

As the dance ended, Marin looked toward Kaerius and the duke beside him. Lovelock stepped forward, not deigning to notice Ralph's cold annoyance.

"Will you honor me with the following dance?" Ralph asked before he let go of Marin's hand.

"I ought to dance with one of my own countrymen," Marin said, her smile sweet and innocent. "Perhaps later this evening." Then she paused and looked around. "Has Galbraith not arrived yet? I wonder why."

Ralph's eyes flicked to her, cold and calculating, and then he said smoothly, "I imagine he is indisposed. Be not dismayed, Your Highness; the

ball is much more enjoyable without him."

Marin blinked at him, her eyes wide and guileless. "I am not concerned about my own enjoyment, but about my hospitality. I should hate to imagine some illness or injury has befallen him within the palace itself."

Then she spun away with Lovelock.

The Mer prince studied Ralph's face, noting the edge of tension and fury in his stiff shoulders. *You wonder if she knows. You wonder whether it matters. Why strike at Galbraith? Was it purely pique, or did you actually think she would choose that greasy old lamprey? If you had actually bothered to woo her properly, instead of acting like a territorial goblin shark, you might have had a chance.*

"What are you saying?" snapped Ralph, rounding on Kaerius suddenly. "Why can't you speak properly?"

I made a bargain I intend to win. But even if I never get my voice back, I'd rather die than let Her Highness fall into your grasping hands.

Ralph's nostrils flared. "You cocky, insulting little idiot. I've seen how she looks at you!" His voice lowered ominously. "Well, your pathetic little star-crossed love is doomed."

Is it now? Kaerius raised one eyebrow mockingly. *How, exactly, do you hope to win her heart with snide looks and bullying?*

Ralph's eyes glittered with malice, but he said only, "Time is running short, Your Highness."

Then he turned to meet Marin with a smooth smile. "Your Highness. Shall we dance?"

Kaerius stepped between them and whisked Marin away, leaving the young duke startled and empty-handed beside Ralph.

"I can't dance with you again so soon," Marin whispered. "It would cause an international incident!"

Kaerius smiled his most charming smile, his eyes bright with mischief and affection. *Not to worry. I wanted only to get you away from that disgusting payara. He's all teeth, and I haven't figured out the details of his threat yet.* He kissed Marin's hand impulsively. He looked up to see her eyes wide in surprise and her cheeks pink.

Then he found one of the young lords who had introduced himself to the Mer prince at the first ball, and he presented Marin to him with a bow and a questioning smile.

“Um, Your Highness,” the youth stammered. “Would you honor me with this dance?”

“Thank you, Lord Sarith,” Marin said sweetly, as if this had been her idea all along. Then she smiled at Kaerius. “Thank you, Your Highness. Perhaps, if you have not promised your next dance to anyone, you might ask me.”

Kaerius’s cheeks flushed, and he bowed deeply. *I had intended to, but your invitation delights me.*

The violins sang as she danced with the Elerian lord, who looked at her with admiration but no possessiveness. Was it a hopeful sign that she had invited Kaerius to ask her for the next dance, or was it merely a way to avoid Ralph again? Either way, her words felt like a gift, and when the song ended, he was there to whisk her away, smiling.

He turned her away from the crowd, noting that Ralph was scowling at them from the far side of the dance floor.

Would you prefer to dance or to rest a moment?

Her eyes were bright as she smiled up at him, and he imagined, he *hoped*, that she felt affection as well as gratitude. “I would be pleased to dance with you, Prince Kai,” she said.

He bent to kiss her hand again and then, for just an instant, pressed his forehead to the back of her fingers. It was a gesture of devotion more formal and less intimate than the brief taste that had so shocked her earlier.

For a moment, the musicians were silent, and the dancers waited to hear what sort of song they would play next. But Kaerius did not wait. With his eyes on Marin’s, he led her into a soft, quiet dance, the steps slow and graceful, so he had as much time as possible to drink in her loveliness.

When they stepped toward each other, she murmured, “I find myself a little shocked at how comforting it is to have you protecting me. I feel I trust you more than is proper. I haven’t really known you long at all.”

Kaerius took in a short, sharp breath and blinked a few times, for his eyes felt strangely damp.

“I hope I haven’t offended you.” She glanced up at him.

He shook his head and smiled, knowing that his expression was open and vulnerable. He ought to have been ashamed of that vulnerability; he wanted to be strong and reassuring, not weak and silly. But her expression softened further, and if anything, she took the next steps in the dance with her body a little closer to his.

His hand on her waist felt the warmth of her body through her dress, and his left hand felt the soft, smooth skin of her hand. He had thought her beautiful before he had bargained with the Lord of the Deep, but now, in her presence, he was more entranced with the sweetness of her smile and the courage of her kindness while she was trapped in this difficult situation. She had not, would not, let her situation prevent her from being gracious.

"This is the third song in a row, Prince Kai. I ought to dance with Ralph." But she did not exactly pull away.

Had it already been two songs? He had not even noticed, though his steps had kept to the rhythm of the music. He opened his mouth, but then closed it again, knowing that even mouthing the words he wanted to say would not be permitted by the magic.

The music danced and spun, and still she did not pull away. She looked up at him, her eyes alight with something that was not yet love, but it was near enough that it seemed a precious gift to him. She trusted him, at least, and that trust strengthened his fierce determination to protect and serve her.

Whether she ever loved him or not.

Galbraith arrived at the ball late, pleading a headache. He did not complain publicly about his shoulder, though he grimaced slightly when he raised it to dance with Marin once. He and his servants had apparently come primarily to assess the attendees for signs of guilt.

The Severtian lord approached Kaerius, somewhat to the Mer prince's surprise, and said quietly, "I presume the crown is conducting a thorough investigation."

Yes.

The lord's eyes flicked around the room, resting on Ralph for a moment. The Boravian lord held a glass of wine in one hand and gestured with the other as he described the riches and might of Boravia to a small cluster of Elerian noblemen, who listened with varying degrees of interest and dismay.

"Who do you think did it?" he said, still staring at Ralph with hard dislike.

You want to duel him here and now? I certainly won't stop you. Kaerius raised an eyebrow. *I'd wager on him, though.*

Only a few moments later, Ralph descended upon them.

"I'm glad you could join us, Galbraith. I heard you were indisposed?"

"Yes." The older nobleman glared back at him with open hostility. "I suppose you heard that I was attacked last night?"

"Oh, really?" Ralph raised both eyebrows. "You seem fully recovered."

"I was nearly murdered." Galbraith smiled, but it was cold and unfriendly. "I presume it was by some rival for the princess's affections."

Ralph's eyebrows rose higher. "That seems quite a leap. I would have thought that the guard you insulted and threatened would be a more likely suspect."

Galbraith sneered. "You would think that, wouldn't you?"

"Or perhaps that idiot prince?" Ralph glanced at Kaerius. "He's pretty enough that I wouldn't think he would see you as a true threat. But," he eyed Kaerius scornfully, "he is rather small, after all. You know how short men compensate for their lack of height with viciousness."

Kaerius was so startled by this that he merely blinked for a moment. When he had danced with Marin, he had liked that they were nearly the same height, for he barely had to look down to meet her eyes. It was true that he was significantly shorter than either Ralph or Galbraith, who were both taller than average. Among the Mer, there was no reason to esteem length, and it was barely a noticeable fact of one's existence, which was given little to no importance in evaluating a rival.

It had not even occurred to me that you two pufferfish were so foolish as to evaluate me on such a trivial feature. Why, if you think me so small and worthless, are you so frightened of me? Kaerius met the Boravian lord's gaze with cold glee. *Is it because I'm so pretty or because you know yourself to be detestable?*

Ralph's eyes narrowed. "It's too bad you don't have your pet guard here to interpret your flapping," he said finally. "It will be hard to make a reasonable case for Her Highness's affections without words."

The Mer prince gave a sparkling smile. *I suppose it would be hard, if my case consisted entirely of threats and promises of power. But I will simply tell her that I love her, over and over and over, in as many ways as I can think of, and eventually she will believe me.*

Galbraith said, “I suppose no one told you, Ralph. The princess’s pet guard was nearly murdered, too.”

The Boravian glanced at him. “Is that so? Pity.” He made no effort to sound either surprised or grieved by this.

The rage that suffused Kaerius was startling in both its suddenness and its intensity. He trembled with the desire to rip out the smug Boravian’s throat right there, to bring justice to the dishonorable moray who had hidden in the shadows to kill a man far more worthy of esteem than himself.

“Do you have something to say?” Ralph raised an eyebrow at him and let out a soft, disdainful *pfft*. He looked back at Galbraith. “Is the guard still alive, then?”

“Last I saw,” said Galbraith.

Kaerius tapped a finger against Ralph’s chest to get his attention. *The only reason you are still alive is because the princess has not given me leave to kill you.*

Ralph laughed aloud, the sound ringing over the music. “Still think you have a chance, do you? Without your pet guard, you are absolutely lost.” He grinned, his eyes gleaming maliciously. “I think I will be even more delighted to break your heart than I will be to gain the princess’s hand and rule over this wretched little kingdom.”

Kaerius spun away, snarling silently. If he had to look at Ralph’s face for another moment, he was not sure he could keep himself from instigating a fight.

The handsome young duke was nearly finished dancing with Marin, and Kaerius strode toward them with his face burning. He bowed sharply to the startled Frintan and took Marin’s hands.

“I wasn’t quite finished,” said Duke Lovelock, his voice betraying his annoyance.

Please. Kaerius held the duke’s gaze a moment, and the young man’s eyes softened.

“No offense taken, of course.” Lovelock smiled a little. “Is all well with you, Prince Kai?”

Kaerius managed a stiff, unhappy smile. Then he looked to Marin, whose eyes were wide in concern. He stepped with her into the rhythm of the dance, his eyes locked on hers. His heartbeat thudded in his ears, fast and hard.

“You look upset,” said Marin carefully.

He nodded once and flicked his eyes toward Ralph.

“Did he say something rude?” Marin bit her lip. “I don’t… well, I wish I could say to ignore it, but I can’t follow my own advice. But there’s no reason for you to be troubled by him. Was he insulting?”

Kaerius shook his head, and then nodded, and then shook his head again. It wasn’t the Boravian’s insults that had so enraged him, although certainly he wished to uphold his own honor. It was the venom in the man’s voice when he had referred to Brighton so rudely and the greed in his eyes when he had anticipated gaining power.

Keeping his steps in time with the music, Kaerius edged her toward the side of the room farthest from his rivals. When they were out of the main activity, he put her hand upon his chest so that she could feel his heart thudding with frustrated anger.

She looked up at him in surprise and concern. “Don’t let him goad you,” she said fiercely. “Whatever happens, I will endeavor to ensure that you are able to leave safely. You are not my subject, and even if Eleria is conquered, you should be free.”

The Mer prince was so surprised by this that he stopped dancing entirely and stared at her.

That was not at all my concern, Your Highness.

Marin’s hand tightened on his. “The investigators haven’t found anything tying him to the attacks. If we could prove he was guilty… but I can’t.” She shuddered.

May I kill him? He held her gaze. *He is a murderous lying bully, and he does not deserve your patience any longer.*

She pressed her lips together and studied him. She glanced across the dance floor at Ralph, who appeared to be regaling the Elerian noblemen with some story. The listeners did not seem particularly happy to listen to him and stared with varying levels of dislike and caution.

“Did you just threaten to kill him?” she said finally.

I would be honored and delighted to serve you in this manner. Kaerius bared his teeth.

Marin sighed. “It would be horribly unjust of me to permit you to risk your life that way for me, especially since you aren’t even Elerian.” Her shoulders slumped a little, and Kaerius’s heart twisted uncomfortably inside him.

He stepped closer and put one arm around her shoulders tentatively. It was a far more intimate gesture than the respectful little lick of her hand that first day; she could easily sink her teeth into his throat, especially since she was not much shorter than he was. Yet the Mer embraced family and trusted friends to offer comfort and affection, and Kaerius intended only to comfort her. While he feared she would pull away, he did not even think of how vulnerable he was to her until after he had done it.

Apparently in the human world, this soft, gentle embrace was less shocking than his chaste lick of her hand. She sighed, as if she were incredibly tired and frustrated, and turned to put her forehead against his shoulder, hiding her face.

He stood without moving, wishing to embrace her more fully but suddenly aware of the surprise in the eyes of the guard who stood nearby. Perhaps this was inappropriate for a ball.

With infinite care, he tightened his arm around her shoulders and put his cheek against her hair. She smelled of floral soap and humanity. Her hair was warm, and he inhaled her scent with a sudden rush of gratitude. If she would not allow him to kill Ralph, at least not yet, she had allowed him to offer this small bit of comfort and safety in the midst of her trouble.

She sighed and straightened. “I’m sorry,” she murmured. “Thank you.”

He bowed deeply. *I am grateful for your trust, Your Highness. I love you.*

Her gaze flicked up and down him as if seeing him in a new light. “Did you say you loved me again?” she whispered.

Kaerius nodded, his eyes not leaving hers. *I love you. I love you. A thousand times, I love you.*

She wiped at her eyes furiously and turned away. “It’s not fair!” she whispered.

Galbraith left only a short time later, pleading a headache, but he managed to dance with Marin once before he departed.

Then, before Ralph could corner her, she said, “I am fatigued. I will retire for the evening.”

Shall I accompany you?

“I think it would be best if we didn’t leave together. Wait at least two or three more dances before you leave, if you don’t mind.” She smiled. “There are quite a number of young ladies who are eager to dance with you.”

Kaerius blinked. *But I love* you. *You outshine them like the sun outshines the moon. They are beautiful, but my eyes are only for you.*

Marin's lips trembled. "I didn't understand all of that, but it looked like a very sweet compliment. Thank you, Prince Kai."

A moment later, Kaerius was left to look across the dance floor at her retreating figure. His heart felt like a starfish left on the sand by a receding wave. What purpose was there in remaining here when life and joy had departed to deeper waters? He swallowed and focused on the other guests. There were indeed several groups of young ladies who smiled charmingly at him. A few especially silly ladies smiled at Lord Ralph, apparently oblivious to the oiliness of his smile and veiled menace in his words.

Duke Lovelock was also quite popular, and he danced with the ladies and complimented them in the most proper ways without implying that he was seriously interested in pursuing any of them. Kaerius watched him, admiring the Frintan diplomat without even realizing he was doing so. The young man managed, apparently without even trying, to be agreeable to everyone.

Perhaps being pleasant took more effort than it appeared to. Kaerius sighed. Certainly it would be easier if he knew these customs.

He danced with three Elerian ladies in succession. "It appears you are besotted with Her Highness," one of them said quietly. "She seems to be fond of you, too. But I think it rather likely that she will end up marrying Lord Ralph. For political reasons, you understand. I would be more than happy to comfort your broken heart."

Kaerius blinked at her, and then forced a cool smile. *That won't be necessary.*

At last he had waited long enough, and he departed the ball. There were guards still stationed around the room, but Marin's personal guards had left with her. Only Lt. Sanders was familiar to Kaerius, and he said that he was to escort Kaerius back to his suite.

I would like to see Her Highness before I sleep.

"What?"

Kaerius indicated a crown on his own head and pointed toward the higher floors of the palace.

"I don't know if she will see you, but you can ask." He led Kaerius up to the royal chambers.

When Kaerius knocked, he was admitted by a servant, who said the princess was with Brighton.

The guard was sitting in a chair in the dark, wearing soft, casual clothes that were thoroughly rumpled. Marin sat across from him in another chair and had been speaking to him quietly, and she looked up at Kaerius's entrance.

"Prince Kai is here." She sighed. "I suppose I'll take Whitaker to the meeting with Ralph tomorrow."

I can accompany you.

"That wouldn't make sense, but I appreciate the offer. I've put him off as long as I can. I must hear his formal proposal." She studied him. "You have done far more than I asked, Prince Kai. In a few more days, I will have no more excuse to ask you to stay."

Kaerius's eyes leaped to hers. *Does that mean you feel at least a little affection for me? That you need an excuse to ask me to stay?*

"Your Highness," Brighton said. "I would very much appreciate you keeping Kai at hand until I can protect you as is my duty."

"Of course," Marin murmured. She looked at Kai in apology.

I would be offended if you did not do so. Please feel no guilt about this, Your Highness. Then, because he wanted to see her smile, he added, *I love you.*

She ducked her head. The humans probably couldn't see the flush that rose in her cheeks, but Kaerius saw it, and it made him smile.

"Go to bed, Derek," said Marin. "There's no need for you to be up."

Marin put her arm around Brighton, who stood slowly and painfully. Kaerius wrapped his own arm around the larger man and helped him toward the bed.

"I'm all right," Brighton mumbled. "I'll be fine. I just want to… I wish I could think what to do." He sat on the edge of the bed and buried his face in his hands. "I'm sorry, Marin." His voice was quiet and broken.

"It's not your fault," Marin whispered. She swallowed and forced a smile. "I'll be fine. Get some rest."

"I'm sorry." Brighton sagged.

A few moments later, Kaerius and Marin had cajoled him into bed just as Lila returned from the bathing room.

She said, "I'm here." He sighed and relaxed, and they left him to rest with his wife by his side.

“Thank you, Kai,” Marin said to Kaerius. “You’ve been very kind. Tomorrow I have a meeting with Lord Ralph in the morning and Lord Galbraith in the afternoon, so I won’t see you until evening.”

How can I help you, Your Highness? His stomach rumbled suddenly, and she stared at him.

“Are you hungry? Didn’t you eat dinner?”

He blinked at her. *I don’t think so. May I eat lunch with you tomorrow? If I cannot accompany you to the meeting with Ralph, I would like to at least hear what he has proposed and how he has threatened you.*

Marin glanced away and then back at him, biting her lip. “I can order you a meal. My father doesn’t eat much dinner, so I try to get him to eat again right before bed. Perhaps you would like to dine with him?”

I would be honored to. Kaerius felt this was a strangely momentous question, as if Marin were trusting him with her father’s vulnerability.

Half an hour later, the servants appeared with small plates on a tray, and Marin ushered Kaerius in to her father’s sitting room. The king sat by the fire in a soft, elegant dressing robe edged in gray fur. One wall of the room had windows which looked out over the darkened sea. The moon glittered on the water.

“Here you are, Your Majesty,” said the servant quietly. “Lobster bisque, warm bread and butter, and the warm cauliflower salad you like.”

The king nodded.

“And for you, Your Highness,” the servant said to Marin. He merely nodded at Kaerius as other servants put more dishes on a nearby table.

Kaerius ate the bread without too much trouble, but found the soup so rich he could only manage half the bowl. The cauliflower salad had far too many ingredients, and when Kaerius tasted it, the flavors made his eyes water. He sighed softly and sat back.

“Did you have enough to eat?” Marin eyed his bowl.

I have gone far longer with minimal sustenance. You have been more than generous. He smiled reassuringly.

Marin said to one of the servants, “Would you bring a plate of the fish he liked last time? Raw. Thank you.”

The king murmured almost inaudibly, and Marin flushed a little. She looked at Kaerius. “Would you like to stay while I play for His Majesty? I often play piano for him in the evenings, but I have not done so in several days.”

I would be honored.

At this moment the servants returned with a plate of fish cut into bite-sized pieces and arranged in neat rows by cut. Yelloweye tuna, fatty salmon, bluefin tuna, eel, lean salmon, and yellowtail made a remarkably pleasing array, and in another situation, Kaerius might have lingered over the meal to better savor each bite. Instead, he ate quickly, not wanting to delay her playing piano, whatever that meant.

Marin sat with him, and he smiled at her between bites. When he finished, she stood and crossed the room to sit at an enormous wooden instrument in the corner.

Then the most exquisite sounds filled the room.

Without thought, Kaerius moved closer. His heart ached with the desire to sing.

Marin's fingers moved over the keys, and she looked up at him and then down again, her cheeks pink.

She began to sing softly.

If there had ever been a more beautiful sound, Kaerius had not heard it. Her voice was like sunlight on water, as sweet as a morning breeze. He stood transfixed, wondering distantly whether her voice was truly that lovely or whether it was lovely primarily because he loved her.

It didn't matter. The sound filled his heart and overflowed, and he didn't notice when tears trickled softly down his cheeks.

After quite some time, she looked up at him and stopped in shock. "Kai! What's wrong?"

He shuddered and blinked. *Nothing and everything. You are so beautiful. I knew you had a beautiful voice but…*

"Are you ill? I didn't mean to upset you." She stood and moved closer to him, studying him in the lamplight. He bowed and put his forehead to her hand.

I love you.

She bent to see his face better. "What's wrong?" Her voice was so gentle and sweet, so concerned, that he wanted to sob.

I love you. He closed his eyes and put his cheek against her hand, letting her feel the tears. Then he met her gaze. *I imagined you fortunate to have captured my heart. I was so foolish! Simply to be here with you is a gift.*

Marin bit her lip, her eyes wide and concerned. “Are you feeling quite well? You must be tired,” she said. “Perhaps we should retire for the night.”

Grief twisted in Kaerius so sharply that he nearly doubled over and wept. *I would love to sing with you someday.*

She pulled her hand from his, and then, for an instant, cupped his cheek gently. “I am sorry,” she said again. “I didn’t mean to… to make you sad.”

He turned his face into her hand and kissed her palm before she pulled away. *Your voice is a gift, and I am grateful for every moment with you*.

Chapter 19

The next day Marin and Kaerius ate a quiet breakfast with Lila.

"How is he?" Marin asked.

Lila looked away, her lips trembling. "He's… I don't think he's in immediate danger," she said at last.

"He's in pain, isn't he?"

Lila nodded. "He won't complain, of course. He's barely eaten since the attack. He said it only made him more nauseated, and he didn't want to vomit because it made his headache so much worse. He slept well last night, though. I suppose that's good." She forced a tiny smile. "Sir Vincent said sleep would help."

"He's still sleeping?"

"Yes." Lila picked at her toast. "He's still dizzy, too. He said it felt like the world kept tilting."

Has anyone found evidence against Ralph?

Marin said, "There is no conclusive evidence of who attacked him."

It was Ralph. I have no doubt. He scowled.

"You're not just holding a grudge because he's insulting and obnoxious, are you?" Marin asked quietly.

Kaerius blinked, momentarily shocked, and then straightened. His nostrils flared as he tried to keep his offended indignation in check. *Absolutely not. I do despise him, but I would not make such an accusation if I were not confident of its truth.*

His stomach churned. He'd barely eaten anything, but he felt sick with frustration and hurt. *Do you really think me so selfish and prideful that I would seek to accuse and kill a man for no reason other than his words? I am proud. I admit it. But I tasted Ralph upon Brighton's jacket, and upon Galbraith's, and I see no honorable reason for that. It may not be evidence you can see, but I vow that it is the truth.*

Galbraith was just as obnoxious to me, and you saw that I saved his life.

He stared across the table at her, his jaw tight.

Do you truly think so little of me?

Her lips trembled, and she nodded. “If you’re sure.”

Kaerius could not bear the faint hint of doubt in her eyes. He knew that her doubt was at least somewhat justified, but it was too painful in that moment to imagine that she thought him vindictive and petty. He stood and bowed deeply and fled to Brighton’s room.

He sat in the dark by his friend’s bedside, with his back against the wall and his arms resting on his bent knees, listening to Brighton’s soft, steady breathing. He cupped his hands over his eyes and then over his ears, so that the sound of the blood rushed like waves.

Marin departed for her meetings without speaking to him again.

The morning and afternoon passed in near silence. Brighton rose to use the restroom once. He leaned on his wife as he did so, muttering thanks and a rejection of Kaerius’s offer of help. Afterwards, Lila helped her husband back into bed and said she would stay with him.

“I’m all right,” Brighton mumbled. “You can read or something. Just… I don’t want the light. I’m sorry.”

I will stay with him in the dark.

Lila put a hand on Brighton’s pale cheek. “I don’t mind staying,” she said.

“I’m all right,” Brighton said again.

“I think Kai would like to stay in here with you. Do you mind if he’s here?” Lila glanced at Kaerius but focused on her husband. “I don’t want to leave you alone, but if he’s here, you can ask for help if you need anything.”

Brighton mumbled something that sounded vaguely affirmative.

“I’ll be right out there,” said Lila to Kaerius. She left the door cracked so the room remained dark, but he could see her move across the strip of light and eventually settle on the couch just outside.

The Mer prince sat on the floor again in silence. He felt hollow and strange. He was hungry, but he did not want to eat; he wanted to stalk through the halls of the palace and find evidence of Ralph's crimes that a human would understand. He wanted to justify himself before Marin, to show that he was not as petty and small-minded as she seemed to believe.

He wanted to weep. He had believed there was warmth between them, that he had earned a little trust and friendship. Perhaps she even desired him.

Instead, she questioned his character and his honor.

He doubled over with his hands over his ears.

As the pulse of his blood throbbed softly in his ears, he wrestled with hope and desire. After seeing the kindness of her heart and her love for her people, he could no longer be satisfied with what he had hoped for at first. He had bargained his voice away because he was beautiful and strong, with power and status among the Mer and a voice that could sing down the stars. He had thought her inevitable desire for him would satisfy his own desire.

He was exquisite and she was lovely, and of course she would love him. When he could sing of his love for her, she would be even more awed by him. She would be honored by his regard, and he would be delighted by her.

This no longer seemed even remotely satisfying.

Kaerius, prince of the Mer, was ashamed.

He was ashamed that he had thought her so easy to win and ashamed that he had expected so little of her. She was a princess with responsibilities of her own! She was a person with needs and desires far more pressing than his regard for her or his pretty face. Perhaps she needed his help, or would benefit from it even if she didn't need it, but she did not need his professions of love to distract her from her duties. She certainly did not need his pride to cast doubt on critical information that only he could offer her.

"Kai?" Brighton croaked.

Kaerius rose. His eyes were damp, but his hand was steady and strong when he put it on Brighton's shoulder. In the darkness, the human could probably see very little, but the prince could pick out Brighton's pale face against the slightly darker blankets.

"Some water, please." Brighton's voice rasped with sleep.

Kaerius poured some from the pitcher and held the cup so Brighton could drink.

His wife stepped into the room, and Kaerius bowed to her and retreated.

Guilt pressed upon him, and he told himself that the attack on Brighton was not his fault. But the guilt and regret stung him like a box jellyfish, sharp and insistent.

Ralph knew that Brighton was Marin's guard, and so he was certainly a threat in his own right. But that alone was not enough to justify attacking the guard. Ralph had already put more than enough political pressure on Marin to ensure the success of his suit; there was no need to attack Brighton physically. If Ralph wanted the guard dead, he would have been able to accomplish that after they were married, when Ralph would have filled the palace with his own countrymen.

If Ralph had not attacked Brighton out of sheer impulsive rage, there must be some more urgent reason.

Why had he attacked Galbraith? Surely he did not perceive the Severtian as a true threat to his suit.

Kaerius flopped onto the couch in the vestibule and lay back to stare at the ceiling. He put one arm over his eyes, letting the pressure remind him of the peace of the deeps. There were predators in the deep, dark water, but there was also silence and space to think. He kept his eyes closed and pulled the blanket over his face, trying to imagine the softness of the cloth was the familiar pressure of water. He put his hands over his ears again, blocking out the faint murmur of Lila's voice as she spoke to Brighton and the gulls and wind audible through the windows of the princess's quarters. The doors to these quarters stood open, but Kaerius had not ventured in there while Marin was gone. Mer were intensely conscious of not intruding where they had not been invited, and though Kaerius had been invited into the sitting room the previous evening, he was not invited now.

If he had been invited, perhaps he would have opened the windows and closed his eyes to smell the salt breeze. He had been inside far too long, and his heart felt bruised and raw without the soothing pressure of water and the taste of salt on his lips. He felt trapped and itchy and dry, with his feet raw and his ear canals empty.

With his hands over his ears, he could almost think clearly.

Perhaps the attack on Galbraith had been the result of Ralph's temper; the Boravian was clearly not a man able to easily forget or forgive insults. Maybe Ralph had seen an easy opportunity to remove the obnoxious Severtian from the issue altogether, leaving himself as Marin's most powerful and threatening suitor.

When Brighton had gone down the hill, he had likely seen the attack in progress and tried to stop it.

Had Ralph thought Brighton dead, or had he known the guard was still alive? It would have been easy to slit his throat while he was unconscious before Kaerius had found him. Had it been a panicked blow made in surprise as Brighton fell upon them to help Galbraith?

No. Brighton had no injuries at all other than the grievous blow to his head. The blow had come from behind without warning, and had been intended to kill or incapacitate. Humans were fragile. If Kaerius hadn't found him, Brighton would likely have died of cold before he'd ever had a chance to wake up.

If it had been essential that Brighton die, Ralph would have taken that last step. So perhaps it wasn't essential that he die. What purpose did incapacitating Brighton serve?

Perhaps the attack was only because of Brighton's defense of Galbraith.

Had Brighton merely seen the attack and rushed to the defense of an unrecognized victim, or had he recognized Galbraith? Kaerius was certain Brighton was honorable enough to defend the insufferable Severtian from an attack, even if he had recognized him. He certainly would defend an unknown victim.

Had he recognized the attacker?

Servants brought lunch, and Lila lit a lamp, turned it low, and ate beside Brighton. She cajoled him into eating a few bites before he went back to sleep.

Kaerius merely shook his head when the servant offered him a tray. Hunger made him feel sharp and clear-headed, and that was useful. He cinched his trousers a bit tighter and resolved to go investigate.

He opened the door and looked out at the guards.

I want to walk around.

One of the guards said, "You want to go somewhere? All right. I'll take you. We'll go by the barracks and send up a replacement."

There were quite a few men standing guard, so reducing their numbers by one for a short time did not seem to concern them.

So they walked down half a dozen flights of stairs into a maze of corridors and large training rooms, where the young soldier told an older man wearing a uniform where he had come from.

“Back to your post. I’ll find someone to show him around.” Kaerius followed the commander to another room where a bunch of men were training with swords.

“Sanders!” he called.

A few minutes later, Lt. Sanders had splashed water on his face, straightened his shirt, donned his coat, and been instructed to escort Kaerius where he wanted to go.

I want see where the Boravian delegation stays.

The guard did not understand this.

The man with curly hair and an arrogant face. Ralph. Where does he sleep?

“The… spirals? Curly hair? Oh, the Boravian delegation.” The guard’s face tightened. “Them. They’re confined to their rooms except for Lord Ralph’s meeting with Her Highness now. You can’t see them.”

The street outside?

Kaerius spent the next two hours walking slowly up and down the steep road, examining every crevice in the rocks for any sign of blood, bits of fabric, or any other type of evidence. There was nothing to be seen, even where he had found Brighton. Perhaps if he had licked all the rocks, he might have been able to taste Ralph’s touch, but that would make no difference in the human investigation. It was not a crime for Ralph to have touched the walls or the door handles.

The frigid wind cut through Kaerius’s coat and whipped his hair into his face. Lt. Sanders shivered but did not complain.

At last, the young man said, “What are you looking for?”

Kaerius sighed. *I can’t find anything useful.*

“Would you like to see the horses? You enjoyed that before.”

I do not want to enjoy anything at the moment. Nevertheless, he followed the young man through the maze of corridors, across the courtyard, and through the streets to the stable.

The horses were fascinating creatures, and he would have enjoyed the quiet, rustling warmth of the stable far more if his heart had not been so

agitated. He leaned his forehead against Sienna's neck, wondering if she knew her master was grievously wounded.

Does Her Highness have a horse?

"I'm sorry. I don't understand."

Her Highness. The princess. With a crown. Does she have a horse?

"The princess? A horse? Yes, she has many horses. Her favorite is kept in the other stable."

They walked across a small, sheltered exercise ring to another large wooden building. Horses nickered softly at their entrance.

"This one. Sundrop."

The horse tossed its elegant head and then snuffled Kaerius's outstretched hand.

But even the horses could not soothe his troubled heart.

What about Galbraith? Is he still pursuing Her Highness?

"I don't know what you mean."

I am finished here. I want a bath.

Kaerius did not want to take the time to heat the water, and he wasn't entirely sure of the process for doing so anyway, so the water was icy cold. He shivered and washed quickly, scrubbing each inch of skin with soap and the rough cloth that had been left for him. The emptiness in his belly made the cold feel like it was sucking the life out of him. His hands felt clumsy and strange. He dried himself off and dressed in the suit that he had worn the first day, noting how his cold-stiffened fingers fumbled with the buttons on the shirt and trousers. His human body seemed so weak and easily fatigued.

At last he managed to get the vest and jacket on, but he left them unbuttoned. What was the point in looking beautiful and elegant to humans if Marin was not there to see him? Besides, his fingers were still numb, and he felt stupid and slow with the cold that had sunk into his bones. He wasn't sure he could get the little silk-covered buttons to cooperate anyway.

He opened the door and was surprised to find that Sanders was still waiting for him.

"The princess should be done with her meeting soon, and I believe she mentioned having dinner with you. Follow me, Your Highness."

Kaerius lagged as the young soldier set off at a brisk pace, and his breath came short.

"Are you feeling ill?" Sanders slowed down. "You're quite pale."

I am a little dizzy and tired. Kaerius felt this admission was justified, especially since the youth was unlikely to understand him anyway. *I'll be fine.*

The exertion of climbing up eight flights of stairs was enough to bring a little heat back to his body, but he felt so light-headed as they reached the top that he stumbled and doubled over with his head between his trembling knees and his shoulder against the wall. His blood rushed in his ears, but the sound seemed foreboding rather than reassuring.

Sanders put a supporting hand on his shoulder. "You're a bit feverish, sir. I'll send Sir Vincent up to Her Highness's quarters to see you, if he's not there already for the captain."

I'm all right. Kaerius shoved himself upright and continued onward.

Sir Vincent was just finishing his examination of Brighton, whom he pronounced much improved but still in desperate need of quiet, dark, and rest. He did say that Brighton might be read to or listen to quiet music for a few hours a day, but ought to do so with his eyes closed. The captain should not read, though; the act of focusing and deciphering the symbols into words was a strain on his injured brain.

I am glad he is recovering. Kaerius felt the guilt twist inside him again when he studied Brighton's pale face. The guard's eyes were deeply shadowed by bruises. Kaerius pointed at them and looked at Vincent questioningly.

"That can happen with trauma to the head. It's only a symptom of the injury, and isn't concerning in itself." Vincent looked at Kaerius appraisingly. "I was inclined to think the worst of you at first, but I didn't want to say it. I owe you an apology for thinking you a violent, untrustworthy vagabond. Her Highness has said you have been quite an encouragement to her in these difficult days, and Captain Brighton owes you his life. He would surely have died in the cold if you had not found him."

With an effort, Brighton said, "Thank you, Prince Kai. You've been a great help."

I am honored to have been of service. Kaerius inclined his head to the physician and bowed a little more to the guard.

Lt. Sanders had stepped back from this conversation, but now he said quietly, "Sir Vincent, before you go, may I ask you to take a look at Prince Kai? I believe he's a bit feverish."

I’m all right.

“Of course.” Vincent stepped forward, his expression suddenly concerned. “Let me feel your forehead, please.”

I’m fine. Kaerius waved a hand dismissively.

“How do you feel? Is it difficult to breathe?” The physician put his hand down but held Kaerius’s gaze.

The Mer prince took a deep breath and felt a strange, sharp pain in his chest. He coughed, and then again, because it felt like the air just would not quite fill his lungs the way it should. He bent over with his hands on his knees, for his head felt strange and light.

He shrugged away from the physician’s hands on his shoulders.

Vincent frowned. “It would really be helpful if you would not be so obstinate. I answer to Her Highness, and I don’t think she’ll be pleased with me if she finds out you’re ill and I haven’t done anything about it.”

Kaerius sagged. It was a particularly effective argument; he did not want to cause the physician trouble with the princess, nor did he want to further distress the princess in her already frustrating situation. To cause a servant to disappoint his sovereign would be shameful. *I’ll be fine. But do what you want.*

The physician put his palm against Kaerius’s forehead. He frowned and put his hand against his own forehead, then against Kaerius’s again. “You’re definitely feverish. What other symptoms do you have?”

Kaerius shrugged. *I feel a little strange. I will be fine. Do not worry about me. I am concerned only about Her Highness and Brighton.* He gestured at Brighton, assuming Vincent would not understand much of this.

“May I listen to your chest?”

The Mer prince frowned in confusion while Vincent brought out a strange instrument and held it up.

“It won’t hurt. I just want to hear your lungs.”

Kaerius shrugged again, suddenly weary. *Do whatever you want.*

The physician slipped one end of the instrument under the fabric of Kaerius’s shirt. Kaerius shivered convulsively at the cool metal against his skin and then straightened his shoulders.

Vincent frowned. “Well, that’s not good. You have a touch of pneumonia.” He shifted the instrument to the other side, and continued frowning. “More than a touch. Not to worry, though,” he said at last. “With

some hot baths and steam to help your lungs clear out the gunk, and some hot tea, you'll feel much better soon."

The Mer prince nodded. *Does it pose any danger to Her Highness or Brighton?*

"What?"

Brighton roused a little. "Sign that again, please?"

Does my illness pose any danger to Her Highness or to you?

"Danger… Her Highness, me… Are you asking if we can catch it from you?"

Yes.

Vincent said, "Well, in theory, yes, but in your case I suspect it's more likely caused by your near drowning, and it's unlikely to pass to anyone else. Coughing is probably helpful to expel whatever sea water is still in there and get some of the gunk out. Hot tea with honey will soothe your throat, and the steam from hot baths and hot tea will help loosen things up."

Kaerius blinked at him. He didn't know what *things* needed to be loosened up, but he didn't really care. He'd never had a fever; Mer didn't get hot when they were ill, and they were impervious to cold, so neither cold nor warmth had any real effect on their comfort. But sometimes Mer and fish would swim to warmer waters if they were ill, so perhaps a fever was similar.

His skin felt like fine strands of kelp were drifting over him, and his bones felt like ice.

The strange sensations were disconcerting, but since the illness was apparently not overly concerning to the physician, he would put it from his mind entirely.

Thank you for your advice. He smiled regally and waved Sir Vincent and Lt. Sanders out of the room. *I will do as you say if and when I have time and inclination.*

When they were gone, Brighton murmured, "I was afraid of that. What time is it, Lila?"

"Nearly six o'clock."

Brighton stood with one hand on the arm of the chair to steady himself. "Her Highness ought to be back by now."

Sit down. I will find her.

Brighton's sharp eyes fixed on him. "Let's go." He strode toward the corner, a little wobbly but mostly alert, and buckled on his sword, which

had been left leaning against the wall. Then he started toward the door to the hall.

"She has Whitaker and several others with her," said Lila. "Whitaker wouldn't let anything happen to her."

Brighton hesitated. "I'm sure you're right. But something must have happened. I ought to know what it is, even if she's not in immediate danger."

Just then the door opened and the princess swept in. She closed the door behind her with a decisive click, and then stood with her back to it, her jaw tight.

"What happened?" said Brighton. His hand rested on his sword.

Marin's face was white but for a bright red flush across her cheeks. She looked at him, and then at Kaerius and Lila, and then back to Brighton. Her hands shook, and she clenched them into fists as she took several steadying breaths.

She was trembling from head to toe, and Kaerius took a step closer.

What happened? How can I be of service?

The princess swallowed and raised her chin. "Ralph said that he had tried to make his suit as pleasant as possible, but he was tired of waiting for me to understand that refusal was not an option.

"A fleet of Boravian warships will arrive in two days. Either he will present me as his wife and Boravia will claim Eleria as a protectorate under his rule, or…" Her voice caught, and she pressed a hand to her mouth.

"Or Boravia will declare war," said Brighton flatly.

Marin nodded wordlessly.

This is ridiculous. Kaerius felt his heart thudding raggedly within his chest, and his face felt hot. *I'll throw him off the cliff! I'll rip out his throat! You can blame his death on the foreign guest.*

"I'll kill him," said Brighton, his voice low and hard. "Perhaps we fall to Boravia. I can't see any way to prevent that; we'll defend the passes but we have no real chance against their warships. But there is absolutely no future in which you are married to him, Marin."

"I can't let thousands of soldiers die when my marrying that snake will prevent an outright war." Tears welled up her eyes, but she met Brighton's eyes steadily.

"Abdicate." Brighton glanced at Kaerius and then, for a long moment, at his wife. Then he raised his chin. "Run away with Kai and disappear.

He'll keep you safe. Take His Majesty and Lila with you; that's all I ask."

"And then what?" Marin breathed. "Anyone I designate as my heir will be dead in a week. I won't do that to you, Derek. They'll kill you and all the guards and take Eleria regardless. I can't run away."

"Ralph won't live to rule," Brighton growled.

"But you'd be dead, and for what? Eleria would still be lost."

"What did you tell him?"

"That I need to think about it." She paced away from them and then back. "Then I had to have that meeting with Galbraith!"

Did he threaten you too?

"Did you tell him what Ralph said?"

Marin blew out a breath. "He said that he would drop the requirement to marry me if I would sign an agreement allowing them access to our port. He despises our 'little salt-crusted village' and only wanted to marry me because I'm young enough to give him an heir. That wasn't actually an order from his king, and he doesn't want the palace, or me, enough to insist on it." She glanced at Kaerius and bit her lip.

"What else?" Brighton pressed.

"He said he didn't want to get between Prince Kai and me." Marin gave a soft, strangled little laugh. "He said he could find someone prettier than me in his own lands anyway, and he would content himself with the political alliance his king required. Giving me up to a… to Kai… was no real loss."

Kaerius blinked. *I imagine he's scared Ralph will try again*.

Brighton swayed. "I agree. A magnanimous gesture like that reflects better on him than having to admit you chose someone else."

That's not what I said. Kaerius glanced at him. *Sit down before you fall down.* He put a hand under Brighton's left elbow.

The guard widened his feet, as if that would help him stay upright. "So we have until tomorrow to come up with a plan." His voice was tight and hard.

Marin nodded. "Yes. I ought not cancel the meeting with Lovelock. Frinta's support may be critical in the coming days."

Require Galbraith and Lovelock to pledge their support if there is war. Kaerius watched Marin's face, trying to see how much of this she understood. *Galbraith owes me his life. He can repay that by supporting*

you in whatever comes. And Lovelock has no reason to bow to Boravia, does he?

Marin frowned. “I don’t have enough to offer to ensure the support of Severt or Frinta, but I will try, I suppose. Severt has no reason to support a Boravian invasion, and Frinta would have to renegotiate their access to the port if we fell under Boravian control.”

Do not marry that stonefish. His face is the best thing about him, and even that is enough to choke a tiger shark. He is toxic, and his very presence makes me ill. His prettiness is shallow and quickly forgotten when you feel his venom.

“I don’t *want* to marry him!” Marin dashed tears from her eyes. “But I don’t think I have a choice, if I love my people. I’ll do this, even this, if it means saving my people from a war we cannot win.”

On the day that the Boravian ships are to arrive, let us watch them come into view together. Ralph is probably not lying, because the threat is so easily proven in two days, but I want to see proof of his leverage against you.

I will ask my people if they know of the ships, and if so, I will have them drive the Boravians off.

Brighton watched all this, frowning in confusion. “What?” he said finally. “I got a little of that but not enough to make sense.”

I will ask my people to help. We will watch for the ships together in two days. And I will kill Ralph tonight. He started toward the door.

Marin caught at his arm. “What are you doing?”

How dare that despicable stonefish threaten you! If we fight Boravia, then we fight. But he should die for threatening you, after you have been far kinder and more hospitable than he deserves. I am going to kill him. You have every right to defend yourself with deadly force, and I am both deadly and honored to be of service. Kaerius bowed deeply.

“Wait.” Marin’s voice caught on what sounded like a sob. “I don’t want to kill him in cold blood, even if he deserves it.” She gripped Kaerius’s sleeve more tightly, her eyes wide and tear-filled. “And when the Boravian ships arrive, if Ralph is dead, it will be much harder to negotiate a peaceful surrender.”

“So use tomorrow to gain what support you can from Severt and Frinta. I’ll meet with General Preston and Admiral McDonagh tonight to

marshal our defenses." Brighton sagged, and his wife wrapped her arm around his waist to support him.

Marin held his gaze for a moment. "Thank you," she said at last. "I suppose we will fall in the end, but I will do everything in my power to save the lives of the good and honorable soldiers and sailors of Eleria."

There is little use in my seeking my people tonight. They will not hear me. May I listen in on your meetings, Brighton?

The guard leaned more heavily on his wife. "Whatever you think best."

Chapter 20

The guards at the door were instructed to bring the Elerian military officials for an emergency meeting with Brighton, and one of the princess's sitting rooms was transformed into a conference room within a matter of minutes. The desk was cleared of ornamental trinkets and the vase of flowers to make room for maps and little wooden cubes of various colors which represented different units and divisions of soldiers and types of ships with their crews.

Eleria boasted only six real warships and a number of fishing vessels which had been outfitted with limited weaponry in previous years and could be called upon at need. When compared with the expected convoy of well-armed Boravian warships, this number seemed small indeed. The Elerian admiral seemed reasonably astute as he planned to deploy his few ships in defensive positions just inside the bay, where they could bombard and perhaps even ram the attacking ships while being somewhat protected from the larger naval forces. Still, they would be badly outnumbered and overpowered.

The situation on land was not much better. The mountains provided some protection, but the Boravian forces were many times larger. As the coming spring made more passes usable, the border would become more difficult to defend by the day.

Marin listened to the conversation but had little to add. It was clear to Kaerius that she trusted these leaders, and he imagined they had served her father honorably for years before she had been forced to step into his place. The king listened too, but he said even less than his daughter.

The higher ranking military officers obviously felt they did not have to defer to Brighton, but they appeared to like and respect him, and the few times he said anything, they listened. Officially, he was in charge of the royal guards and the defense of the palace itself, and thus was subordinate to the general. Still, his position was one of great responsibility, and he was

also known to be liked and trusted by the princess. For the first half hour, he stood over the map and watched as they moved units around. Then, apparently too dizzy and exhausted to stay upright, he staggered to the nearest chair and collapsed with his head in his hands.

"You ought to be in bed," said General Preston. "Let the silent prince help you to your room."

"I'm all right," Brighton mumbled. "The light… can I have a cloth to cover my eyes?"

Marin found a silk scarf, and Brighton wrapped it around his head like a turban and pulled the folds of cloth down to cover his eyes.

"What's that for?" asked the admiral.

"The light feels like knives through my eyelids," muttered Brighton, with an uncharacteristic catch in his voice. "Keep on. I'll just listen."

He put his head back against the high back of the chair and drifted in and out of a dazed stupor of pain and fatigue. When one of the other men asked why Kaerius was allowed to listen in, Brighton waved a hand and muttered, "He'll help protect Her Highness."

Marin agreed with this, and though Kaerius's vow of love for the princess was not understood by the officers, he was allowed to stay.

In the darkest hours before morning, they had a rough plan, and the officers departed to convey this plan to their subordinates. Lila and Kaerius helped Brighton to bed.

When Marin was about to retreat to her private rooms, Kaerius caught her hand. *Your Highness, I love you.*

Marin's lips trembled. "If you love me, I am sorry for you. I should not have involved you in my troubles at all."

Kaerius dropped to his knees so the lantern light would fall across his face. Perhaps that way she could see the passion and sincerity in his eyes. *I regret only that I saw you as a beautiful prize to be won rather than a courageous woman of honor. The beauty of your face, body, and voice is far surpassed by the beauty of your heart.*

"I advise you to disappear, Kai. There can be no good end to this. There is no reason for you to be killed defending me when the outcome is more or less assured."

The Mer prince shook his head. *I am sorry that you think so little of me.* But he was not offended or hurt; he could see the grief and fear in her eyes, and he knew she intended to protect him. To protect him! A prince in

his own right and a formidable warrior. *If I die, I die. But Ralph will not get his disgusting hands on you. I promise you that.*

Marin's tears overflowed silently, and she looked away. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "Just go, please. I don't want to have your death on my hands, too."

Kaerius's heart twisted inside him, and he bowed his head. *I am sorry to disappoint you in this,* he signed at last. *But honor and love compel me to serve you, even if you hate me for it. I will not trouble you again.*

He bowed to her and stood, drinking in her beauty one last time. Then he stepped quietly out of the room and left the royal chambers.

He nodded to the guards and then found his way to the stairs. He descended five flights before he had to stop and cough, and then he leaned against the wall because he could not get enough air for several minutes. He took the next three flights of stairs more slowly as his heart thudded raggedly in his chest. It would not do to faint now; there was no time for his human body to fail.

For a moment he wondered if the kraken's threat of having his human lungs fail was even now being fulfilled. But he did not think the kraken would be so impatient to kill him; it had been little more than a week, and the Lord of the Deep had promised him thirty days. This was not the kraken's fault.

The lower levels of the palace were a maze of stone corridors, servants' quarters, and rooms for all sorts of work, but Kaerius did not stop to explore them. He wandered through the labyrinth until he found a door to the western side of the palace, where he exited the building to the lower portion of the road some way up the cliffside.

The road was in shadow from the sun just beginning to rise behind the palace, and the sea was a deep, vast darkness ahead of him beneath the gray sky. Kaerius followed the road down the hill and then turned onto the steep, narrow path down to the frigid beach.

Wind whipped at his hair, and his legs burned as he clambered down the path. The ocean smell filled his lungs like a breath of hope. He coughed and sucked in a huge breath of icy, salt-scented air.

His boots crunched on the sand when he reached the bottom of the cliff. His human body was susceptible to chill, so he undressed, for there were no humans to be embarrassed by this, and put everything in a neat pile

at the base of the rocks. When he exited the water, he wanted the clothes to be dry.

He walked, shivering, to the icy water.

The water that lapped at his bare toes was so cold he hesitated for a moment. But Marin needed him, needed the Mer to stop the Boravian ships, so he stepped deeper into the water. When the water was only waist deep, he sank into it so that he could duck his head underwater. The cold stole the breath from his lungs, and he coughed convulsively, nearly choking on the water before he could catch a breath of air.

How fragile human bodies were! His chest felt like it had iron bands around it, and he could not breathe deeply enough to satisfy his lungs.

No matter. He had a mission.

He could not sing, but he could click his teeth enough to call for the Mer.

The prince ducked his head under the water again and clicked his teeth, and then listened for a response.

There was nothing but the rush of the water in his ears and the ragged thud of his heartbeat.

Click click.

Nothing but the sounds of the ocean. Something scuttled along the harbor floor a quarter mile away. Dolphins sang and clicked, hunting sharks.

Click click click.

Humpbacks called in the distance. Harbor seals hunted fish near the shore.

Click click.

The ocean was full of life, but the Mer did not answer him.

The Mer prince lifted his head and took several breaths, ignoring the tightness in his chest and the shivers that wracked his body. He ducked his head beneath the water and began to click again.

Kaerius clicked and listened, clicked and listened, as the tide came in, bringing a pod of harp seals which frolicked in the waves. Their antics roused him enough to realize that he was drifting much too close to unconsciousness and death from cold. He clicked again and, when he did not hear an answer, staggered from the water to his clothes. He dried himself with his trousers and then dressed. He was too cold to shiver and

too dazed by the cold to fathom climbing up the path to the palace to warm up.

Without conscious thought, the prince curled up on the sand and fell into the darkness.

He drifted toward awareness only because it was so difficult to breathe that his human body began to scream for air, and he woke, gasping, to find that his chest felt like he was a thousand fathoms beneath the surface, with his lungs crushed by the weight of the water above him. He flopped onto his back and sucked in air, only to cough and gasp again.

He pulled off his jacket, vest, shirt, and trousers, and stumbled toward the water.

Another hour, then two, then three. Kaerius clicked and listened, clicked and listened, as the last warmth of his body seeped away into the water. The screams of the gulls overhead jerked him back to wakefulness as his mind drifted, and he clicked and listened again.

Then, while his mind was almost clear, he dragged himself from the icy water, dried himself with his trousers again, dressed, and stumbled up the steep path. At the bottom of the road, he looked up the hill and felt the deep, cold ache of despair. His exhausted body did not have the strength for even half the climb, and he nearly crumpled to the ground right there.

The fever in his veins had kept him from freezing solid, and it strengthened him now for a few more uneven steps. Then a door opened, and several of Brighton's young soldiers came out.

"Prince Kai!" one of them cried out. "Where have you been? We've been looking everywhere for you."

In the water. His hands were so stiff and clumsy he could not form the signs correctly. He would have been embarrassed, but he was too tired and cold to care what they thought. *Requesting help for Her Highness.*

The soldiers hauled him up to the princess's chambers, and he was so stupefied by the cold that he did not notice or understand what they were doing as they undressed him and put his icy body beneath the blankets of his pallet with some rocks warmed by the fire. Someone called for Sir Vincent, and by the time he arrived, Kaerius was so deeply asleep that the physician's examination did not rouse him at all.

"Why is his hair wet? What madness is this?" Vincent muttered. "I really don't know why he's alive at all. His heart's scarcely beating."

Brighton had roused from sleep just after lunch and was now alert, though still fatigued and nauseated with the pain in his head. He said, “He was going to… something about asking for help, I think?”

Marin frowned. “From whom?”

The physician looked at Brighton too. “In the water?”

Brighton’s concerned frown deepened as he looked down at Kaerius’s white face. “Yes,” he said at last. “But he doesn’t look like he received the answer he wanted.”

The princess, Brighton, and Admiral McDonagh ate a grim, silent meal in the royal quarters as the sun went down over the sea. General Preston had already departed for the border, having done all he could to strengthen the city’s defenses. The admiral would board the one warship remaining in the harbor as soon as he finished his meal, and they would set out for the mouth of the bay, to reach the defensive position before dawn.

As Kaerius’s icy blood slowly warmed, his fever returned. He drifted toward an aching, breathless awareness and lay on the pallet for several minutes, trying to figure out where he was and why his chest felt like it was being crushed. At the sound of the admiral’s voice as he bid Marin goodnight and farewell, Kaerius sucked in a painful breath and rolled over to his stomach. The room was dark, for Marin had wanted to let him sleep, so he staggered to the door of the suite just in time to see the admiral as he departed.

“Farewell, Prince Kai,” said the officer. The man bowed to him sharply, as if he believed Kai to be a true prince.

Kaerius nodded.

“How do you feel? Would you like some dinner?” asked Marin. She stood at the sight of him and smiled tremulously, as if determined not to mourn for herself, but only for her country.

I am not hungry. It was true; he felt too empty and feverish for food to sound appealing at all. His pulse throbbed in his ears and his skin crawled with chills, but he ignored the strange sensations as he focused on her face. He dropped to one knee and bowed his head.

“Kai, come sit down. You look ready to keel over.” Brighton’s strong hand gripped Kaerius’s shoulder, and the larger man hauled Kaerius to the nearest chair with a grunt of effort. Then he put a hand on the prince’s forehead. “Good grief, you’re burning up! I thought we’d lose you to cold, not fever. Where were you all day?” Brighton’s voice shook.

To ask my people for help. I told you that. But they were not close enough to hear me. He took several deep breaths, trying to get enough air. *My father has a younger brother. The line of succession is not entirely wrecked, even if I am cut off from it. I had hoped to rule my people someday, but if I must spend my life to defend you, Your Highness, I am honored to do so.*

Marin said to Brighton, "Did you understand that?"

"Not much of it." The guard put his hand against the table to steady himself. "Something about defending you." He swallowed and met Kaerius's eyes. "Tomorrow the Boravian ships should be visible. I suggested to Her Highness that we watch from the upper lookout. Until I see proof that Ralph's threat has teeth, I see no reason to give him an inch."

Kaerius nodded. *Agreed. And when we see the ships, I will kill Ralph. Whatever sacrifices must be made, Boravia will learn not to threaten Her Highness.*

The guard frowned in confusion. "Don't… don't make this more difficult than it has to be," he said at last.

The Mer prince shot to his feet and nearly toppled over. He bared his teeth at Brighton and clicked them angrily. *I am not the one causing trouble! I am not the one threatening Her Highness! Do not expect me to sit back while Ralph abuses her kindness and generosity. I consider you a friend, but do not push me, Brighton.*

Brighton's frown deepened, and he studied Kaerius a moment longer. "Drink some tea to loosen up the gunk in your chest," he said finally. "Then get some sleep. I'd appreciate it if you were ready to defend Her Highness tomorrow."

Kaerius's chest heaved, and not entirely from his turbulent emotions. He closed his eyes for a moment and swayed, his teeth still bared. *I am always ready to defend Her Highness*.

He bowed to the princess and straightened only by force of will, then stumbled back to his pallet, where he collapsed into an exhausted, feverish sleep.

The night seemed interminably long to Kaerius, who drifted in and out of dreams and dazed awareness of Sir Vincent holding his head up to drink mugs of tea and inhale the scented steam. He drank a little, coughed until the world spun around him, and fell back into the darkness.

When Marin opened the door separating her inner chambers from the vestibule in which Kaerius slept, the light was still soft and gray.

"How is he?" she asked.

Vincent had dozed off sitting on the floor with his head against the arm of the couch. He roused and put a hand against Kaerius's sweat-beaded forehead. "He's alive."

At this touch, Kaerius curled onto his side and coughed violently. When the coughing subsided, he merely lay there, limp and exhausted, his chest heaving. He tasted salt and mucus.

"It's strange that he makes no sound," the princess said. She knelt by Kaerius, who had his eyes closed and was so dazed that he did not at first hear or understand the sound of her approach. Then she put her hand on his chest, and he opened his eyes to see her sweet, pale face.

She held his gaze. "I am sorry for involving you in this disaster, Kai. You have acted with courage and honor, and I wish I could to repay you as you deserve. Captain Brighton and I will watch for the ships from the upper lookout. Sir Vincent will take you in to my father's chambers, along with the rest of the royal guard.

"If and when we see the ships, Ralph's party may mount an attack on His Majesty. If you stay with him, you will be as safe as my guards can manage."

Kaerius put his hand over hers and moved it a little, so that her palm was flat against his thundering heart.

She gave him a melancholy little smile. "I feel it too. I wish… never mind."

He rolled over to his stomach and put his hands beneath his shoulders, and then with a great effort, managed to shove himself up to hands and knees.

"I'll help you to the inner chambers with my father," said Marin quietly.

But he stood and offered her his hand, then bowed over it to press his forehead to the back of her fingers. *I will not hide in safety while you face Ralph. Do not ask it of me, Your Highness.*

Chapter 21

The gray morning light could not compete with the golden light of the lantern on the table.

"I'll be back in a moment," Marin said, and she hurried back into the royal chambers to kiss her father one more time. This gave Kaerius a moment to straighten his shirt and trousers and pull on his vest and jacket.

Brighton leaned on the doorframe while Kaerius finished dressing. "How do you feel?" he asked.

Very, very strange. This must be some human illness. Kaerius's fingers shook as he fought with the last buttons on his jacket. His cheeks were flushed with fever, and his hair was damp with sweat on his forehead and at his temples. *I need a bath, but I will wait until Ralph is dead.* He grimaced at the thought of Marin wrinkling her nose in disgust at the smell of sweat on him.

He felt sour, sticky, and annoyed. If he must die fighting, he wanted to be beautiful as he did so. She deserved the best of him, and he did not want to disappoint her. With some effort, he put this frustration from his mind. What she needed now was not his handsome face but his courage, ferocity, and skill.

"Well, it's probably terrible for you, but in a pinch, I've found that getting thoroughly chilled helps control a fever in the short term." Brighton smiled grimly.

Perhaps I should go swimming again. Kaerius looked up at the larger man. *I should be armed. What of you? I thought you were at the edge of death.*

Brighton straightened. "Here. It will buckle onto your belt." He handed Kaerius a sheathed knife. "I really shouldn't ask this of you, but we're desperate." He met Kaerius's gaze seriously. His pale blue eyes were shadowed with fatigue, pain, and lingering bruises, but he looked alert. "Whatever happens, your priority is the princess's safety."

Kaerius scowled. *I am offended that you think it necessary to say that.*

The guard sighed.

Marin stepped back into the room and strode toward the door with quick, sure steps, as if she had left all her trepidation behind with her father. She carried a long, wooden tube in her hand.

"Your Highness," Brighton murmured, and he stepped aside to let her precede him out into the hallway.

Kaerius followed, slightly annoyed that Brighton had taken the position nearest the princess. But as they strode through the halls, he found his breath coming short, and it was all he could do to keep up with the princess's pace and Brighton's long, easy strides. He tried not to gasp audibly, though his chest felt like the iron bands around it were tightening with every minute that passed. A number of guards followed them. Lila had apparently been instructed to remain with the king, as that was the most protection the guards could provide.

At last they stepped from the palace onto a section of the road with a platform built atop the sheer cliff face from which one could see most of the beach at the bottom of the cliff to the left and the protected bay before them all the way to where it opened to the deep ocean beyond.

Marin walked all the way to the stone wall at the edge of the overlook and raised the wooden tube to her right eye. For several long minutes, she said nothing. Then, without a word, she handed it to Brighton.

After a minute's careful study, Brighton said, "I only count three. There are likely others hidden behind the point."

"I agree." Marin pressed her lips together.

What is that? Kaerius gestured at the tube.

"It's a spyglass." Brighton showed Kaerius how to look through it to see the promontory in the distance and the ships just visible beyond it.

The frigid wind tasted of salt and freedom, and Kaerius sucked in a deep breath that stung his lungs. He coughed and doubled over. How inconvenient it was to need air so desperately! His vision blurred for a moment with the force of his coughs, but the icy wind brought clarity to his mind. He turned so that the wind off the sea blew into his face and leaned against the stone wall for support. The cold cut through his jacket and bit at his skin, and he felt the pain with relief, for it helped him focus.

At this moment, there was a sound behind them, and Ralph strode out of the palace toward them with an entourage of Boravian soldiers. "Good

morning, Your Highness!" he said in a jovial voice. "What a magnificent view!"

"It is beautiful," Marin said. Her smile was not exactly kind or friendly, but it was polite.

Kaerius wished she would be rude to the Boravian. Ralph deserved her rudeness and disdain; he did not deserve her courtesy. But it was not in her character to be unkind, and when he looked at her pale, troubled face, he felt only admiration for her sweetness.

Marin reached for the spyglass, which Brighton surrendered. She looked through it again, biting her lip, and said finally, "I do see the ships, Lord Ralph."

She handed the spyglass back to her cousin. The tall guard looked through the glass, his mouth grim. Finally he said, "I count at least twelve now, all well out of range."

Marin said quietly. "It's a show of force, even if they haven't attacked yet."

Ralph had found his own position at the wall some distance away, leaning casually upon the stone with his elbows and looking through his own spyglass at intervals.

"So you see I have been exceptionally patient," he said, as if continuing a previous conversation with the princess. "Boravian naval forces will be here by nightfall. It will go much better for you if we are married and can receive them peacefully. If you insist upon resisting, we will raze this pathetic city to the ground, keeping only this palace as an interesting example of primitive architecture."

Brighton straightened and took a deep, slow breath. He opened his mouth and then closed it again, letting the princess speak for herself.

Marin said, "I want to know that you will honor the promises you made during negotiations. Safety for my guards and staff, mercy toward my people, everything."

Ralph shrugged one shoulder carelessly. "I really don't think you're in a position to negotiate, princess. I have been patient. I am finished with that.

"These are your options: You will marry me right now, in the sight of all my witnesses, and you will rule as my obedient and dutiful wife. Or I will kill your staff in front of you, starting with your pathetic father, followed by your precious guard, and so on, until you learn the futility of defying Boravia."

The princess recoiled. “And what of your honor and the promises you made? Do you throw them aside so easily?”

The Boravian shrugged again. “Why should I make allowances for your people and your staff? If you would marry me easily and without force, I could do what I wanted afterward. But you are determined to make this difficult and time-consuming, and I have run out of patience. When the ships arrive, I will either be married to you and ruling this salt-crusted little backwater, or I will be tragically widowed, with no obedient little Elerian wife to restrain my harsh rule. Which would you prefer?”

Brighton drew his sword and stepped forward, pale and swaying and resolute. “Eleria does not bow to Boravian threats,” he said in a low voice.

Ralph rolled his eyes and drew his own sword. “Idiot,” he muttered. “Princess, call off your dog or watch him die.”

Brighton’s nostrils flared in suppressed fury. “Your Highness,” he said. “Give me leave to kill him.”

“With pleasure,” said Marin, her voice low and shocked, as if she had not expected to ever hate anyone as much as she hated Ralph.

One of Ralph’s servants lunged at Brighton without warning from one side. Steel glinted in the man’s hand, and Brighton drew up his sword in a quick defense.

The blade sank deep into the attacker’s chest, and only Brighton’s considerable skill enabled him to pull his sword clear fast enough to defend against another servant.

Ralph’s direct attack would have overwhelmed him.

Except for Kaerius.

The Mer prince drew his knife and deflected Lord Ralph’s blade just as it would have skewered Brighton. The Boravian had advanced so quickly he nearly lost his balance, and he drew back with his face twisted in fury.

Kaerius advanced toward the foreign lord, forcing him a few steps away from the others and closer to the wall at his back.

Ralph lunged at the prince, snarling, and Kaerius grinned and clicked his teeth. He avoided the lord’s first attack and parried with the knife, and then parried again, surprised by the speed of Ralph’s recovery. Movement in the air was much different than in the water.

“Imbecile,” cried Ralph. He lunged again, and Kaerius, inexperienced in swordplay and footwork, misjudged the Boravian lord’s reach.

A bright, searing pain bloomed in Kaerius's chest, and he lost his breath. Ralph yanked at the sword, and Kaerius stumbled forward. He slashed wildly at Ralph, who screamed in shock and horror, and then, with desperate fury, Kaerius fell upon the larger man.

Ralph had another knife, and he plunged it into Kaerius's side.

Again, and a third time. The pain made the Mer prince convulse.

With his arms wrapped around the Boravian lord and his mind full of blood and death, Kaerius acted on instinct more than thought.

He buried his teeth in Ralph's throat as he shoved the larger man bodily up and over the stone wall. The Boravian cried out in pain and clutched desperately at Kaerius, wrenching the prince's arms nearly out of their sockets and pulling him up the wall. With his teeth in Ralph's throat, Kaerius did not notice or care when his feet left the ground.

They fell together, down, down, down to the foam-flecked waves five hundred feet below. Ralph screamed, high and terrified, and thrashed wildly with the knife until their tumbling bodies bounced off the sheer cliff and he lost his grip.

With his ears full of the wind and Ralph's screams, Kaerius could not hear the princess's scream, the shouting of servants, or the cry of horror from Brighton.

A fall from this height into water was not much softer than falling onto stone, and the impact knocked both Ralph and Kaerius senseless. Their tangle of arms and weapons separated slowly as they sank beneath the waves, and the blood spread in the water in a cloud.

"Well, that didn't go as you expected, did it?"

The voice filtered through the haze of pain that fogged Kaerius's mind, like the memory of something he had once known.

He couldn't answer. His human lungs were full of water, blood, and bits of bone from the shattering force of the impact. His fingers twitched, but his body was dying, and his mind was far too full of pain and confusion to convey anything coherent. He would not be able to decipher the words much longer.

"Did you learn anything, Prince of the Mer?"

A deep, rich laugh echoed through the water, older than whale song and strangely comforting beneath the pain that crushed Kaerius's chest.

A tentacle wrapped around him, and his broken bones ground against each other as the kraken tugged him through the water. Kaerius would have

screamed, if he had breath or strength or voice.

Even the awareness of pain faded, and he didn't hear the kraken's next words.

"She will be here in a moment, little prince, and we shall see if your love is reciprocated."

Chapter 22

The princess ran all the way down the long, winding road to the bottom of the cliff. Sobs caught in her throat, and she gasped for breath, brushing tears from her eyes as she ran.

Brighton followed as quickly as he could. At last one of the young soldiers matched his steps and put a supporting arm around him, so the guard was able to lengthen his strides without falling on his face. His head pounded and the world spun around him, but he focused on the princess's pale figure ahead of him and pushed on through the dizziness and pain.

He caught up with her on the narrow path from the road down to the beach.

"Wait," he gasped. "Wait, Marin!"

She turned to him only for a moment. "Don't fall!" Then she hurried on.

He swallowed nausea and hurried after her. "Wait," he said again.

At the water's edge, she fought with the rope tying up the little skiff. "Help me!" she gasped. Her fingers were so small and tender, and the rope was rough and tied too tightly for her.

He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her head against his chest. She was trembling, breathing far too quickly, and he braced his feet wider, because he felt himself swaying.

"Stop," he said. "Marin, you can't… don't go out there. I've seen what a fall like that does to a man's body. Please don't put that in your mind."

"What if… but what if he's alive?" she sobbed. "What if he needs help? I need to…"

Brighton closed his eyes and put his cheek on the top of her hair. It was easier to stay upright if he didn't see the world spinning and dancing around him.

"He's not alive, Marin," he whispered. "But he loved you."

She took a tremulous breath. “Then I should… I should see the cost of his love. We should see his body and bury it with honor, if we can find him.”

Brighton didn’t have the energy to argue against this, and his heart twisted at the thought of leaving the broken body of his friend to sink beneath the waves without a shred of honor or affection.

So with no more protest, he knelt at the side of the skiff and began to untie the knots with trembling fingers. The young soldier worked at the other rope.

Finally the ropes loosened, and Brighton stood and shoved the boat into the water. Marin splashed into it, and the boat rocked as she settled into the seat.

Brighton clambered in with a huff of effort. The young soldier pushed the boat farther into the water and hauled himself in.

“I can…” Brighton started.

“Let me, sir,” said the soldier firmly. He took the oars in both hands and turned the boat, then rowed out toward the place where Kaerius and Ralph had fallen.

Brighton closed his eyes for a moment against the blinding sunlight reflecting off the waves; the light felt like waves of pain in his throbbing head. He swallowed bile again and forced himself to focus on Marin’s pale face. She stood in the boat, her eyes searching the waves.

“There!”

From this distance, the cloud of blood in the water was only a faint, dark shadow. No other sign of either body was visible, but the soldier turned the bow of the skiff and rowed vigorously as the princess pointed.

They slowed as they drew closer, and Brighton stood with Marin to search the water.

“I don’t see him,” Marin said. “A little farther, please.”

A great swirl of water spun the boat around as if it were a feather, and Marin caught a glimpse of something huge deep beneath the water, with tentacles as wide as Brighton was tall.

“What was that?” whispered the soldier. “Sir, we need to…”

“Wait,” Brighton said sharply. “What is that there?”

Something floated slowly upward from the tangle of suckers and death.

No, two somethings. Two bodies.

A tentacle unfurled beneath them and pushed one of the bodies upward, leaving a cloud of red as it rose.

Brighton jumped into the water and swam down, his eyes stinging. The water was so cold he felt his movements slowing, but he continued downward until his ears throbbed and his lungs screamed for air.

There! Kaerius floated in the water, eyes half-closed, and the water beneath him was dark with blood.

With no breath left, Brighton grabbed Kaerius's hand and swam to the surface, tugging the broken body behind him. His soaked clothes and boots drew him downward inexorably, and he kicked off his boots with panicked strength.

A moment later, there was someone else in the water with him. Just when Brighton thought he could not hold his breath a moment longer, they finally reached the surface. The young soldier had jumped in only a moment after Brighton, and though he was not plagued by Brighton's excruciating headache, he was not as strong a swimmer as the older man. Still, he had thought to help his commander, and he'd had the presence of mind to kick off his boots and remove his jacket and shirt before jumping in.

"Help me get him in the boat," Brighton gasped.

The princess leaned over and gripped Kaerius's shoulders, preventing him from sinking again while the soldier hauled himself into the skiff from the other side, so they wouldn't capsize.

Marin wept, her sobs soft and broken.

Kaerius's head sagged backward, and his arms and legs drifted slowly beneath the hull as the wind caught the skiff and pushed it slightly toward shore.

"He's breathing!" Marin gasped.

Brighton was shivering violently, and he whispered, "Marin," and then stopped, because what was there to say?

He had seen the crushed mess of the back of Kaerius's head; he had felt the ends of broken ribs in his friend's back. Blood and water filled Kaerius's mouth.

"Sir, let me help you up," said the young soldier. "You've been in the cold too long already."

"I don't want to lose you too," Marin gasped, and she offered her small hand to Brighton as the soldier helped him clamber over the gunwale. Even

for someone of Brighton's strength and determination, this was exhausting, for the cold had stolen his strength and his soaked clothes pulled him down like weights.

Once he was in the boat, Brighton would have fallen completely into the darkness but for the young soldier's quiet, urgent insistence that he strip off his soaked shirt and jacket and put on the younger man's dry wool jacket. It didn't quite fit, but he held it closed with shaking hands. The younger man dried himself off with his own shirt and then sat bare-chested, shivering in the icy wind.

Were there tears on Brighton's cheeks? Perhaps it was only the seawater. "Marin, he's gone."

But she would not let go of Kaerius, and her tears fell on his face like little diamonds before they were lost in the ocean.

The ocean swished, and in a flash of green and gold and indigo, Kaerius was jerked from Marin's hands back beneath the water.

"No!" she cried.

The three humans watched in horror as the great creature beneath the water held Kaerius in one monstrous tentacle and sank back into the depths. They could not hear the conversation that ensued.

"Little Prince of the Mer, it seems you have earned her love after all."

The words filtered to Kaerius's mind like sunlight upon his face after a long sleep, a bright point of clarity in the fog of confusion and ennui.

"Am I alive?" he asked. How strange it was to hear his own voice again! "Why am I alive?"

"Do you remember the bargain we made?"

"I think so," Kaerius said cautiously. "I was to court the human princess I love, and if she reciprocated my love, I was to regain my voice, keep my life, and earn the right for both of us to walk the land or swim the sea as we choose. And if I failed to earn her love, I would lose voice and life and sovereignty."

"It appears she loves you. She is weeping for you even now."

"How can she love me now, when she did not before?" The Mer prince said it slowly, for his mind was fogged with the magic of the Lord of the

Deep and the terrible injuries the magic was even now repairing in his body. “And why would you save my life when you had all but won the wager?”

The kraken laughed, the sound like a crack of lightning through the water. “Why should I want to kill the prince of the Mer? I have no shortage of tasty meals, but there is a dearth of good kings beneath the waves. If you have won the love of the human princess, perhaps you have learned a little humility. You can be a better king to your people.”

Kaerius pondered this with a growing sense of guilt. “My father is a good king,” he said at last. “Despite our differences, he has always been honorable.”

“Your father ruled in war, but the war is over.”

“My father is still king, and I have no desire to take his place early.”

“I did not say you were to be king yet.” There was a hint of laughter in the creature’s voice. “I can tolerate your father’s posturing a little longer.”

“Do not hasten his death,” Kaerius said.

A strange tremor in the water tickled Kaerius’s skin, and he realized the kraken really was laughing.

“What would you do about it?” The deep, ominous voice shivered inside the Mer prince’s bones, as cold and subtle as fear itself. “Your father postures in his own territory, not mine. I will not start a war with your people for the sake of eliminating such a small annoyance.”

For a moment Kaerius could only breathe. A strange, foggy sort of relief filled him, and he imagined his father’s face. How he longed to see his father again!

“I thought…” Kaerius frowned, feeling the familiar water in his lungs and the smooth muscle of his tail. “I thought you were a monster to be feared. I made a bargain thinking I risked everything for love, and now I find you remarkably generous, Lord of the Deep. Have you been misunderstood so badly?”

The kraken said sharply, “I am a monster, little prince. I would eat you if it served my ends. I find myself more pleased by the thought of a generous, humble king of Mer than by the temporary pleasure of picking my teeth with your bones. There are others I can eat, but few others who could rule as you will.”

“Thank you,” said Kaerius. “The pain is gone. I will be able to walk on land too?”

“Just as your princess will be able to swim like Mer,” said the kraken, and perhaps there was a smile in his voice. Certainly there was no dismay at losing this bargain.

“Thank you,” said Kaerius again. “Shall we be friends, then? I think it would serve us both well.”

“I have no need of friends,” said the kraken, and he sank out of sight.

“What about allies?” Kaerius called after him.

“That would be acceptable.” The kraken’s voice came out of the unseen depths.

Then Kaerius swam upwards with powerful strokes of his tail, his eyes fixed on the silhouette of the boat against the bright sky at the surface of the water.

With the strength of life in his veins and joy in his heart, he could not resist leaping high in the air, arcing over the little skiff and diving down again on the other side.

Then, with his heart filled with love and gratitude, he swam to the skiff and popped up with a sharp, toothy smile of triumph.

Marin flinched back and then looked closer. “Prince Kai?” she said. Her voice shook. “You were dead, and then… what happened?”

“I made a bargain with the Lord of the Deep,” said Kaerius, his eyes searching her face. “You were weeping. Why?”

Her eyes were red, and her lips trembled. “You can talk!”

For a moment, Kaerius could not look away from her, but he forced himself to glance at the others in the boat.

“Why are you wet, Brighton?” Kaerius remembered nothing of Brighton’s nearly fatal effort to bring Kaerius to the surface. “You’re cold.”

“It’s freezing,” said Brighton, with admirable steadiness to his voice, though his body shook. “Let’s get you out of the water. How are you alive?”

“I don’t mind the cold,” said Kaerius. He’d been falling, and then… then what? The kraken’s voice echoed in his mind. *It appears she loves you.*

“You have a tail! And your teeth are different,” Marin said. “But you’re still yourself.”

Kaerius ran his tongue over his familiar, sharp teeth as he took in Marin’s tearful appearance and the shivering men. “I think you humans need to get warm,” he said at last. “Do you have a rope?”

Marin pulled the rope from the bottom of the skiff and handed it to him.

Rope in hand, Kaerius surged toward shore, towing them far faster than a human could have rowed.

He shoved the boat onto the shore with Mer strength and as he landed upon the sand and thought of legs, he found himself stumbling to his feet, suddenly chilled by the wind and water that had not troubled him a moment earlier.

“Good grief!” Brighton’s laughter had an edge of hysteria. “Your trousers are ruined.”

Kaerius pulled off his ruined shirt and wrapped it around his waist. Humans were funny about which body parts were acceptable to bare.

“What are you?” said Marin wonderingly. “You had a tail! I saw it. Kai isn’t even your name, is it?”

“My name is Kaerius,” the prince said, and his smile was softer and sweeter than it had ever been. “I would very much like to hear you say it someday. I’ve loved you for years.”

“Kaerius,” she repeated.

In her voice, his name was even lovelier than he had imagined, and tears sprang into his eyes.

They wanted to talk, to explain and wonder and marvel at each other, but Brighton sagged, and Kaerius said, “Let me help you.”

So Kaerius and the young soldier supported Brighton up the path to the road, where servants and guards were hurrying down to assist them.

“The Boravians have been detained,” said one of the guards to Brighton. “Their servants were in on it, but we captured them all, sir. Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” the captain said, but he was pale and unsteady on his feet.

“Good. Thank you. Let’s go inside so Brighton and Prince Kai can warm up.” The princess motioned them toward the nearest door.

“The Boravian ships!” Kaerius said suddenly. “I’ll be back.”

Feet flying, he ran back down the path to the little beach. He stripped down to his underclothes and sprinted to the water, where his tail appeared as soon as he imagined it. With powerful strokes of his tail, he crossed the bay in only a few moments, and then he was in the open ocean.

Kaerius opened his mouth and sang of terror and tentacles, the might of the Elerian army and the honor of its men, a storm sweeping west over the valley to wreck the ships upon the shoals, and the Mer who would eat the sailors’ flesh and pick their teeth with splinters of human bones.

He sang of the safety to be found in the Boravian port from which the ships had come, and the devastation and despair that awaited the men if they continued to advance.

Within minutes, the air was filled with cries of fear from the men. Even the most courageous and determined commands of the officers could not convince the sailors to pursue their attack, for Kaerius's voice was filled with all the magic of the Mer, which could compel men to fling themselves into the water and drown themselves deliberately.

He could have compelled them to turn on each other in murderous rage. He could have sung them to their deaths in a hundred ways.

The Mer prince asked for so little, so very little, in his voice of magic and power. He merely told them they should turn around and return to their own country, and offered so much safety and protection from the terrifying dangers of the Elerian bay. The authority of the Boravian officers could do nothing against his voice.

Even the most stalwart of the officers cracked, for he finally let himself imagine for just a moment the sharp-toothed Mer who swam beneath them and the kraken which waited to crush their mighty ships into pieces. The admiral screamed in terror, and at this, all pretense of organized retreat was lost, and the ships turned and sailed away with entirely undignified haste.

In the palace, Brighton changed into dry clothes and a thick wool coat as quickly as he could, and, still shivering, he and Lila met Marin at the lookout in time to see the ships retreating.

"Incredible," he murmured.

"Is he a prince after all?" asked Marin.

"He said he was, and I almost believed him, but it was difficult to fathom." Brighton swallowed, leaning harder on the wall. "I don't find it difficult to believe anymore."

From this vantage point, they could not see Kaerius streak back through the bay toward shore, for he swam just a little too deep underwater. They saw him emerge at the shore line and the sudden appearance of legs rather than his tail, and they saw him hurry to his clothes and dress before disappearing on the curving path below them.

"Go inside," said Marin. "You must be freezing."

"You need the privacy?" Brighton said.

"I just don't want you to catch pneumonia," said Marin.

Then Kaerius came into view striding up the road, and his face broke into a smile when he saw them.

“May we go inside?” he said. “You look cold.”

They urged Kaerius to change into new clothes that weren’t wet with water and blood, but soon they were gathered in the royal quarters.

Seated by the fire, Brighton eventually stopped trembling with cold. He and Marin and Lila listened with wide eyes to Kaerius’s account of his bargain with the kraken and his memory of those strange moments between life and death.

“Why would you make such a bargain?” Marin said at last. “You didn’t really know me and couldn’t have really loved me.”

Kaerius flushed and looked down at his hands. “I thought I loved you, and I certainly loved myself. But I found that the more I knew you, the more I loved you, and I didn’t care as much about the bargain. Instead, I cared about your safety, and it made me furious to think of you trapped with one of those men.

“You deserve so much better, and I would gladly die to keep you from being so trapped. I thought I would.

“But…” He glanced at Brighton, now slumped back in the chair, exhausted and dazed from his ordeal but still paying attention. “I found that in the moment of crisis, there was little I could do for you other than to keep Ralph from killing Brighton, and I was honored to give my life for him.”

He straightened and met Brighton’s eyes squarely. “You were always kind to me, even when you had no reason to be, and I respect you more than I can say. Also, if you were alive, you could defend Her Highness better than I could, and I would give my life for either of those reasons.”

“You really do love me?” Marin said softly.

Kaerius knelt before her, looking up with his wide, ocean-blue eyes. “How could I not? You didn’t believe me or understand when I told you, so I tried to show you.” His voice caught a little. “I would like another chance to show you I mean it.”

Marin’s cheeks flushed pink. “I believe you mean it,” she said. “I wonder only if perhaps you were a little precipitous. I have seen your honor

and courage, but how much do you really know of me?”

The Mer prince caught her hand in both of his and pressed his forehead to it. “I know you are willing to sacrifice your happiness and your life for your people.” He looked up to hold her gaze. “I know you were kind to me when you thought I was a half-drowned human, able to offer you nothing, even after I offended you by my customs that were strange to you. I know you wanted to send me to safety, as if the life of a stranger ought to be valued even when you felt yourself trapped and doomed. I know you respect and love your father, though his ability to protect you has been compromised by injury and illness.

“I do not know all of your heart, but I know enough to be certain of mine. I love you, and I will choose to love you as long as I breathe air or water, if you will let me.”

Marin gripped his hands. “Eleria is not safe yet,” she said.

Her hands trembled. Still on his knees before her, he kissed them. “All the more reason to let me love you,” he said, smiling roguishly. “It is an honor to defend you and the people you love.”

“What of your people?” Marin asked.

Kaerius stood and drew her to her feet. “Shall I introduce you?”

“You’re really a prince?”

“I am! But I hope not to rule for many years.”

The morning light streaming through the windows lit his hair and caught the warmth in his blue eyes as he looked down at her. Marin laughed and looked down, giddy with relief and hope. “I would like to meet your people,” she said shyly. “I was never sure if the Mer really existed at all. What will they think of me?”

Her smile was so sweet and hopeful that for a moment Kaerius could not find any words at all. At last he managed, “My father will be grateful for how you have changed me.”

Brighton laughed under his breath, and Kaerius frowned at him in mock anger.

“How dare you laugh at the prince of the Mer?” he said, raising his chin.

“Sorry,” Brighton murmured. He eyed Kaerius as if seeing him a new light.

Kaerius blinked. “It was a joke,” he said. He studied Brighton’s face. The man was still pale, and the dark bruises around his eyes seemed even

more pronounced than they had earlier. “You are as noble a warrior as I have ever met,” he said. “I am honored to count you a friend, Brighton.”

Brighton stood. “Likewise,” he said, and he pulled Kaerius into a short, hard embrace. He thumped the prince on the back before he pulled away.

Startled, Kaerius stood frozen for a moment, his eyes wide.

“Did I hurt you?” Brighton asked. “I’m sorry. Are you still injured?”

Kaerius shook his head with a soft huff of embarrassment. “I was going to say that I would count it a service to both our nations if you would not take my dignity too seriously, and not allow me to do so either, but it seems you do not need the invitation to unsettle me.”

Marin chuckled softly, relief and joy bubbling up in something like hysteria, and she wiped tears from her eyes as she laughed and wept at once. “Are you well, Kaerius?” she asked shakily.

Slowly and tenderly, he stepped closer and put his arms around her, taking his time so that she had time to withdraw if she wanted to. “I am,” he said.

Face to face, he bent just a little to meet her eyes, and he smiled, sweet and triumphant and joyful. “I am with you, so I am well, Your Highness.”

She bit her lip and smiled up at him. “I should call you Your Highness as well. You’re a prince.”

He blinked. “I like the sound of my name on your tongue much better than my title.”

“Kaerius,” she murmured.

His smile widened.

“You should call me Marin,” she said softly.

“Marin.” Her name tasted sweet in his mouth, like sugar crystals and hope. “Marin,” he said again, savoring it.

Then he took a deep breath and said, “I ought to speak with your father and make my intentions known before I introduce you to my people.”

The sunlight streaming in through the windows lit the spacious room in shades of warm gold. Kaerius followed Marin to where the king sat by the fire.

“Father,” she said, and she bent to embrace him. “Prince Kaerius sent them away. Lord Ralph is dead, and Lord Galbraith has agreed to a political alliance rather than marriage.”

“Kaerius?” the king said curiously. He looked up, his cloudy eyes searching for what he could not see.

Marin looked toward Kaerius and nodded that he should speak.

Kaerius knelt before the king, his clear blue eyes on the older man’s face. He took one of the king’s hands and cupped it on his face, so the king could feel him smile.

“It is an honor to greet you properly, Your Majesty,” he said. “I could not speak before, because I had bargained my voice to the Lord of the Deep for a chance to court your daughter. I have triumphed in that bargain: your daughter wept for me, demonstrating her love, and thus I have earned back my voice and my life.”

The king’s cool, dry fingers swept over Kaerius’s cheeks, feeling the soft golden waves of hair that fell over his ears and the sharp line of his jaw. He traced the line of Kaerius’s lips and paused as he felt Kaerius smile again.

“The Lord of the Deep?” the king asked.

“A kraken—*the* kraken—that rules the deep waters. His magic is great, and while he is not usually friendly to my people, he has been unexpectedly kind to me.

“I wish to marry your daughter. She has given me hope that if I ask her, she will not refuse me. Will you allow me to make a formal proposal?”

“But who are you?” the king asked. “You speak of your people and you smell of salt and the sea wind, and I have never heard of a Prince Kaerius in any of the neighboring kingdoms.” His voice faded to a nearly inaudible whisper by the end of this, but Kaerius understood.

“I am the prince of the northern Mer,” Kaerius said. “My people live in all the northern waters, and my father rules from the ice in the north to the warm southern waters. I am his heir, and I wish to marry your daughter.”

The king’s fingers twitched against Kaerius’s cheek, and he murmured, “I did not know the Mer were real. How can a Mer marry a human?”

Kaerius smiled fiercely. “With joy and devotion, Your Majesty. I will love her as long as I breathe water or air, and we will rule together on land and sea, if she accepts me.”

The king said, “You may ask her, and if she accepts, I will make a treaty with your king.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Kaerius cupped the king’s hand against his cheek and turned a little, so that the king could more easily feel his smile as he bowed his head in acceptance.

Then, still kneeling, he let go of the king’s hand and turned to Marin. “Will you marry me, Marin de Gracey, to rule with me in the sea and on land, in love with each other and in service to your people and mine, for all our years?”

Marin took his hands and tugged gently, so that he rose to stand face to face with her. “I will, Kaerius.”

His heart thudded raggedly in his chest, and he trembled with joy and desire. He leaned forward and then hesitated. “Do humans kiss to show their love?” he whispered. “Lips against lips, hearts united, with arms wrapped around each other? That is what Mer do.”

Marin laughed and kissed him full on the lips. “Yes.”

Chapter 23

By the time they had explained more to the Elerian king, it was late afternoon. Brighton had grown alarmingly pale, and when they turned toward the door, he swayed, off balance for a moment before he steadied himself.

They decided to introduce Marin to the Mer king early the following day, primarily so that Brighton could rest and be able to see whatever could be seen when he had recovered a little more.

“I should have asked the Lord of the Deep if he would heal you,” Kaerius said remorsefully. “I am sorry, Brighton. I will ask him in the morning.”

“Will he do it?” Brighton asked doubtfully.

“I doubt it.” Kaerius tilted his head to one side. “My people have no significant healing magic, but I will see what my voice can do.” So he sang of healing, rest, and comfort. He sang of courageous endurance through pain and despair, and he sang of valor and integrity, honor and virtue. He sang of the bond between friends who shed blood together and of well-earned rest and convalescence after injury. With all the power and magic of his Mer voice, he sang of strength regained and health restored.

As he sang, he and Lila helped Brighton into the guest bed in the royal suite, his voice like golden threads of hope and affection and gratitude filling the air with light. His voice grew softer as Brighton dropped into sleep.

The lines of fatigue and pain around Brighton’s mouth and at the corners of his eyes smoothed, and his breathing became slow and even.

Kaerius still sang, letting the magic of his voice do whatever it could to soothe Brighton’s pain and help him heal. He leaned against the wall and slid down it to sit with his head bowed and his eyes closed, still murmuring magic and power.

When his voice finally faded, he slumped to the side and slid down to lie on the floor, his eyes closed.

“Kaerius,” Marin whispered. When he did not respond, she called for Sir Vincent to examine him and Brighton.

The physician did not want to wake Brighton, but said he seemed as healthy as before, and he was sleeping well. Kaerius was deeply asleep, and only when Sir Vincent put smelling salts under his nose did he twitch and groan back to a groggy half-awareness.

“You might as well go to bed.” Sir Vincent and one of the servants cajoled him into standing up and staggering to the pallet of blankets where he had slept the previous night.

When Kaerius drifted up from the depths of slumber the next morning, the first thing he heard was the princess singing and playing piano. The door to the royal suite was open, and the scent of the sea came through an open window.

He stood, feeling both drained and refreshed. His head felt light and his muscles loose and ready for action. He peeked around the corner to see Marin sitting at the piano, and for a moment he only watched and smiled.

Then, when he had the melody in mind, he joined his voice to hers, his power restrained. His voice danced and rippled below hers, pure and lovely and exuberant with the dawn.

She looked up in shock, losing her place in the music for a moment, and when he smiled at her, still singing, she lifted her voice again.

The king sat near her with his eyes closed as he listened. When Kaerius drew closer, the king rose unsteadily and turned his face toward the Mer prince.

“Is that the Mer prince?” he whispered.

Marin let her fingers slow as she said, “Yes, Father. Prince Kaerius is here.”

Kaerius said, “With your blessing, I would like to introduce Her Highness Marin to my father and my people. I wish to wed as soon as she is ready.” He turned his brilliant smile on Marin and added, “I have loved you

for so long that every minute we are not wed feels like a year. May we set sail soon, please?”

Marin blushed and laughed. “May we eat breakfast first? Father, will you accompany us on the ship?”

“I will.”

So they ate a quick breakfast, and Kaerius was delighted to be served a plate of slices of raw fish. “Don’t you want anything else?” Marin asked.

“The other foods are interesting, but this is most delicious.” Kaerius felt a rush of pleasure at being asked, and his delight increased at Marin’s answering smile.

Two hours later, they stood on the deck of the royal ship, which Marin called a cutter. Kaerius watched the sailors in fascination as they worked the sails and ropes. When the ship reached the mouth of the bay, the prince said to Brighton, “I never thought about how much humans had to know and understand to make these ridiculous contraptions work.”

While not exactly healed, Brighton had benefited greatly from a very long, very restful sleep, and the headache that had so tormented him had entirely disappeared. He took a deep breath of the salty breeze, and said to Kaerius, “You said you have no healing magic, but I think you give yourself too little credit. I feel almost normal, but for a bit of dizziness.”

Kaerius beamed. “I am glad of it.”

The captain had been told to head into the open ocean, and he did so. Marin turned to look behind them. “The land seems so far away,” she murmured. “Is it silly to be a little frightened by that? What if we lose sight of land and can’t find our way back?”

Kaerius said, “I’ll teach you Mer ways, and you will be a princess among my people too.” Then, reluctantly, he said, “Perhaps I ought to go first, in case my father is angry with me.”

“Is he dangerous?” Marin’s teeth worried her lower lip.

“Extremely, but not to you.” Kaerius grinned. “Don’t worry. I’ll be back soon.”

He stripped off his shirt and trousers, belatedly reminded that humans seemed to be shy about such things. He leapt overboard, and his tail formed as quick as thought before he entered the water.

“Father!” he sang. “Your Majesty!”

Much faster than he had anticipated, and before he had time to brace himself, his father’s arms were wrapped around him in a crushing embrace.

“Idiot Kaerius,” his father’s deep voice rumbled. “What were you thinking?”

The king’s voice shook, and his arms tightened around Kaerius’s shoulders. His silver hair made a cloud that obscured the prince’s view, mingling with his own pale gold.

“You’re alive.” The king did not pull away.

Kaerius said breathlessly, “You’re nearly as strong as the Lord of the Deep, Father. Let me breathe.”

The king relaxed his grip and withdrew just enough to look Kaerius in the face, his grimace somewhere between a scowl and a grin. “What were you thinking? Are you entirely healed?”

“I’m fine. I wanted… did you know where I was?” Kaerius felt the questions swirling in his mind and couldn’t decide what to ask first.

“Not until this morning. The Lord of the Deep told me he had met you and healed you of many hurts, and in so doing had won a bargain he made with you. I have been searching for you.” The king’s ocean-blue eyes searched Kaerius’s face and then swept over his body, looking for any injury. “Are you truly healed? What bargain have you made with the humans?”

“I have given the human princess my heart, and I have won hers in return. We wish to marry. Her father the human king wishes to make a treaty with you.” Kaerius stopped. “The kraken said he won the bargain?”

“Yes. I wondered what it had cost you.” The Mer king took a great, shuddering breath and closed his eyes for a moment. He gripped Kaerius’s shoulders more tightly. “He was entirely too pleased with himself, too smug, and he would not tell me the terms of the bargain. He said you would have to tell me yourself, and that reassured me that at least you were still alive while I searched for you. What is this about a treaty with the humans?”

“Come. I wish to introduce you to the human king and the princess, Marin de Gracey, as well as a friend, Captain Derek Brighton. You will like him. The Lord of the Deep did something unique for us, and I wish for you to see it.”

The Mer king followed Kaerius to the surface.

“Lower a skiff!” Kaerius called.

Soon a boat was lowered holding the human king, Marin, Brighton, and a young sailor to man the oars. As it descended, the Mer king

murmured, “It is bold indeed of a human, even a princess, to aspire to your hand, Kaerius. Why would you honor her so?”

“I feel entirely the opposite, Father; I am honored by her regard far more than she is by mine. I will tell you in more detail when we speak later. For now, I will consider it a personal affront if you are rude to them, and an act of honor and love if you show them the generosity of character which you have always shown me, even when I did not deserve it.”

The Mer king turned to face him, his eyes glittering with surprise and pride. “What a strange transformation you have made.” Then his gaze flicked upward and he said, “I wish to hear the whole story tonight.”

“Yes, Father.”

When the boat bobbed in front of them, Kaerius beamed at Marin. “King of Eleria and King of the Mer, see what the Lord of the Deep has done for us! Your Highness Marin, please sit upon the edge of the boat and dip your feet in the water.”

She shifted to the edge of the boat, slipped off her shoes, and carefully swung her feet over the edge. When her toes touched the frigid water, she sucked in a sharp breath.

“It is cold. I am sorry for it.” Kaerius looked up at her and offered a hand. “Think of your tail, and the magic will give it to you. Come to me.”

She put her small, warm hand in his cold one, her eyes locked on his. Then, with a deep breath, she closed her eyes and slid off the edge of the boat into the water.

Kaerius ducked with her under the water, so he was able to see the precise moment her eyes opened in shock. She opened her mouth and looked down at her tail.

The Mer prince laughed in delight, both at the magical wonder that the kraken had wrought and at Marin’s surprised expression. “You are so beautiful, my love,” he said.

She blinked at him, her mouth closed and her eyes wide.

“You can breathe underwater, you know. The Lord of the Deep promised.”

Deliberately inhaling water was undoubtedly terrifying, but after a moment’s hesitation, the princess let out a cloud of bubbles and took a breath of water.

“I’m not drowning,” she said, her voice high and astonished.

Kaerius beamed at her.

Still underwater, she turned to face the Mer king, whose silver hair formed a cloud around his chiseled face. She ducked her head for a moment, as if in a curtsey, and then straightened with her tail waving softly to keep her in position before him. “Your Majesty,” she said. “It is an honor to meet you.”

The Mer king’s piercing eyes swept over her, lingering on her tail for a moment before he met her gaze again. “You are still human?” he said doubtfully.

“I think so,” she said. She took a deep breath of water, still looking rather surprised. “I am Princess Marin de Gracey. My father is His Majesty Aubert de Gracey, king of Eleria.”

“Did you know my son was a prince when you began to love him?”

Marin shook her head, and her dark hair waved in the sunlit water. “No, Your Majesty. He won my heart with his courage and honor, not his title.”

The Mer king eyed her. “You speak well. I will parley with your father.” He swam up to the boat, and when his head emerged from the water, he shook his wet hair from his eyes and smiled toothily at the humans. “King of Eleria, I greet you,” he said, his deep voice smooth and commanding. “It has been long since your people and mine have spoken at all, much less considered an alliance.”

The human king replied, “King of the Mer, I greet you.” His voice was weak and rough compared to that of the Mer king. “Prince Kaerius has shown courage and nobility among our people.” He lost his breath and took a moment to gather his strength, his hands gripping his knees tightly. “In recent years, my daughter has shouldered more of the weight of the crown than I would have wished. My greatest wish for her marriage is her happiness.”

The Mer king asked about the human king’s ill health, about the political pressures in the human world, and how exactly Kaerius had won the princess’s heart. The human king asked about the world of the Mer, the power of Mer singing, and the dangers which Marin might face as Kaerius’s bride.

Both kings consented to the marriage, but they agreed that there ought to be a period of time in which Kaerius introduced Marin to the Mer as his betrothed, and in which Marin reintroduced Prince Kai the silent prince as Prince Kaerius the Mer prince. Both Mer and Elerian societies would be

shocked, and the kings thought it wise to give them time to accept the idea and to show that the decision to marry the two royals and ally the two kingdoms was fully considered.

Thus the wedding was set for some six months later, in midsummer. Marin gripped her father's hands and told him about her tail and how she could breathe underwater, while the Mer king was introduced to Brighton and heard a brief account of how Kaerius had earned Brighton's respect and saved his life twice over.

Soon they agreed that the Mer king and his chosen advisors would meet the humans in three days in the Elerian harbor. Marin was invited to return with Kaerius to the Mer people at that time, to spend a week with the Mer learning to swim, hunt, and sing to the dawn.

Kaerius imagined introducing her to Kali and his other cousins, and to the Mer warriors who had fought with him. How she would smile to hear of his triumphs! But he would be even more delighted to tell of her heroism and the nobility of her love for her people. His warriors would respect her as he did.

"Would you like to swim with me back to the harbor?" Kaerius said quietly. "Just us, following the ship?"

Marin smiled at him. "I would like that."

The Mer king eyed his son, his eyes bright and knowing. Then, to Kaerius's shock, he said, "Take your time, Kaerius. I will expect you at midnight at the harbor entrance. The time before that is yours, to spend with your betrothed as you will."

Kaerius beamed at him. "Thank you, Father."

So when the boat was hauled up to let the king, Brighton, and the young guard board again, Marin stayed in the water.

They swam back to the little beach slowly, following the shadow of the ship. Marin said, "A tail is so hard to control! How do you move so quickly and so gracefully?"

Kaerius swam backwards in front of her, the subtle movements of his tail enough to keep him ahead of her. He grinned. "A tail is no more difficult than legs and feet! It is more difficult to learn the currents and the scent of prey two miles away and the sound of a shark."

Marin's eyes widened, and Kaerius added hastily, "Don't be afraid! I'm more dangerous than any shark." He bared his teeth fiercely, and she stared at him.

“Is that how you got your scars? I wanted to ask but I didn’t want to be rude. But if we’re to be married, I’d like to hear about your world.”

Kaerius blinked and looked down at his chest. “Most of these are from other Mer in the war.” He moved closer and took her hand. “But I will tell you anything you ask, and I will protect you with my life from any danger in the sea or on land, and I will sing to you every night, if you wish. I will spend my life to keep you safe and happy, Marin. Only tell me how I may please you, and I will delight in it.”

Marin laughed softly and wrapped her arms around his neck.

Kaerius’s cheeks flushed a little as she held his gaze.

“You do please me, Kaerius,” she said softly. “And I love to hear your voice. I want you to tell me everything, so that by the time we are married, we feel we’ve known each other all our lives.”

“As you wish, my love. You must do the same, though.”

“I will.”

They sealed this agreement with kisses, first slow and sweet, then full of passion and desire, and at last tender and affectionate again.

“They’ll be waiting for us,” Marin gasped at last.

“Do you want to hurry back?” Kaerius murmured.

“I think I’d prefer to go slowly,” said Marin, meeting his eyes again. Her cheeks were pink. “To allow time for conversation, you understand.”

“And kisses,” said Kaerius.

“And kisses,” Marin agreed.

Next in Once Upon A Prince

Available Dec. 1, 2023
Read here!

A dreamer prince. A princess out of his reach. A second chance to keep their promises.

Four years ago, Prince Marcus was imprisoned in a tower with only his servant-bodyguard for company. His crime? Falling in love with the daughter of his father's rival.

After the spell keeping them trapped breaks, the prince and servant escape to discover that the war Marcus wished to avoid already came and

claimed the lives of his family. Penniless, homeless, and the target of an assassin sent by the father of the woman he hoped to marry, the erstwhile prince sets out to reassure himself that his beloved is alive and well.

But Princess Adriana is about to wed a wealthy lord, and when a brokenhearted Marcus and his friend accept jobs as servants, they find themselves in the last place they should be—serving Adriana's betrothed in the castle of a king who wants Marcus dead.

Yet the princess may still have feelings for him and her betrothed is more cruel than charming. With his life and love at stake and only days until the wedding, Marcus will find his resolve to achieve his dreams tested.

The Crownless Prince, a gender-swapped retelling of *Maid Maleen*, is book 10 of Once Upon a Prince, a multi-author series of clean fairy tale retellings. Each standalone story features a swoony prince fighting for his happily ever after.

This standalone story is set in the world of Selina R. Gonzalez's The Miraveld Chronicles, about two hundred years prior to that series.

Content: Fade-to-black (married)

TW: Brief scenes of physical abuse

Read The Crownless Prince here!

Check out the rest of Once Upon A Prince here!

Prologue

In the fading light, the looming stone tower cast a long shadow, as if trying to swallow up the small procession moving toward it. The flickering orange glow of the torches offered no comfort.

Prince Marcus eyed the few, recently barred windows in the square tower. He hadn't thought his father so serious about his threat. Realizing how easily his father, the current ruler of Alimer Principality, would imprison his youngest son, and at only seventeen, only made him respect the man less.

Their procession reached the tower, and a stone-faced guardsman opened the door.

"Marcus."

He turned to face his father, his teeth clenching. Torchlight gleamed on the thin gold crown resting on Prince Arlius's dark hair and cast the angles of his face in harsh contrast.

“This is your final chance. Repent and accept the marriage I’ve arranged for you.”

Even if things were different, Marcus had no desire for a loveless marriage designed to secure a military alliance. He would not aid his father in plotting against the other two sovereign Aedyllanian principalities and hastening war. The union his father wanted symbolized the opposite of the dream he shared with Adriana—of a peaceful Aedyllan without all of this vying for power.

Tipping up his chin, he looked his father in the eyes. “I love Princess Adriana Faine. I gave her my vow. I will marry her and none other.”

His father’s expression contorted. “Idiotic fool of a disloyal son! Let’s see if a few years of seclusion will teach you respect and understanding of your allegiances! Enter the tower.”

Marcus glanced at the guards surrounding them, then his gaze fell on Edwin, whose head was bowed to avoid drawing attention to himself. He turned back to his father. “I ask you again to reconsider Edwin’s—”

“This ungrateful dog lied for you, covered for you, and assisted you in defying me,” his father bellowed. “Would you rather I have him executed for treason?”

Marcus took a step back, toward the tower, his stomach dropping. Surely he wouldn’t…would he? “No, Father.”

“If they won’t enter, force them in.”

At the regnant prince’s order, a couple of guards stepped toward them. Marcus grabbed Edwin’s sleeve and dragged his servant-guard into the tower after him. The door slammed shut, plunging them into darkness, and a lock clicked.

His father’s command came muffled through the thick wood. “Plaster over the door!”

Marcus swallowed. The craftsmen his father had brought along would close up the only door into the tower, and then his father would impress his seal into the drying plaster, so no Alimer subject would dare to break it. The other principalities would not challenge that seal within Alimer territory, either, so even Adriana’s father, Prince Mortimer, couldn’t help Marcus if he wanted to.

How could they escape? The door was thick, and the plaster would be, too. The stone walls were even thicker. Would the bars in the windows prove an easier obstacle? The biggest challenge would be going unnoticed,

so their progress wasn’t thwarted. Perhaps they could tear up the floorboards and dig their way out.

A small part of him still hoped this was a ruse. Surely when his father realized how serious Marcus was, he would relent. The door would be opened, and his father would say, “You truly are a man of your word. I cannot punish you for that.”

Instead, scraping sounded on the outside of the door.

“I’ll look for a light, my lord,” Edwin murmured. His footsteps moved away, further into the dark tower, but Marcus stood rooted in place, listening to the sound of his freedom ending.

Was his father watching impassively? Did he care at all that he was losing his youngest son? Would he really leave Marcus there for seven years? They’d never been close, as Marcus didn’t share his father’s aggressive nature and would rather wait for peaceable solutions to disagreements. Still, his father’s callous treatment cut him deeply.

Then there were his two elder brothers. Neither had accompanied them, and both had called him foolish in the past. Did they agree with their father that seven years of isolation was what he deserved for not supporting their father’s kingship aspirations?

A curse upon the last king of Aedyllan, who had died nearly a century prior without heirs. In his infinite wisdom, King Vithmir had thought appointing his three most trusted friends as equal princes would prevent a power struggle. Now those princes’ great-great-grandsons did little but argue and were all eyeing the title of king. And Marcus, for daring to believe the principalities could continue to coexist and having the audacity to fall in love with the daughter of a man his father considered a rival, was being punished for a long-dead king’s lack of foresight.

The minutes dragged by. Edwin returned with candles and left one on the floor when Marcus made no move to take it. Cold seeped into his fingers and toes, the winter chill not yet fully driven away by the emergence of spring. Still he stood, unmoving.

Eventually, the scraping stopped. Voices said something he couldn’t make out.

Then his father’s authoritative voice. “I seal this tower with my mark and a fae curse.”

Marcus jolted.

“This tower will be impervious to harm, unable to be broken into or out of, until I order it opened, or I perish.”

Marcus staggered back. His father was so angry he’d risked seeking aid from the dangerous fae to keep Marcus incarcerated?

Any remaining cords of familial affection or loyalty snapped.

He’d be trapped here.

For seven years.

With no escape.

“Adriana…” Her name left his lips like a plea as his heart shattered. His knees gave out, and he dropped to the floor, tears blurring his vision. “I’m sorry.”

He’d made her a promise.

“I’ll always love you. I don’t care how long we have to wait for our fathers to see past their pride; I won’t give up on the dream of us and of peace. One day, Adriana, I’ll marry you. I swear it, on the stars in the sky and the blood in my veins and the ancient soil beneath my feet. I’ll be your husband.”

“Forgive me,” Marcus whispered.

And then he curled up on the floor next to the faltering candle and wept over the death of dreams.

Once Upon A Prince Bingo

ONCE UPON A PRINCE BINGO

Front goose	Licking soap	Cover with arm tattoos	Radish-stealing gnome	Cover with roses
Sunburst	Cover with arrows	Cover with pottery	Cover with frost	Sweets
Painting	Cover with ribbons		Cover with a frog	Homey caves
Braids	Cover with an apple	Cover with a cat	Cover with glowing eyes	Masquerade balls
Cover with tentacles	Dragons on the beach	Cover with shoes	An extremely fluffy rabbit	A ratty hat

www.onceuponaprinceseries.com

Complete a row(horizontal, diagonal, or vertical) and submit the bingo card to get an entry in the OUAP bingo giveaway! Giveaway open until February 1st, 2024. For more information, or to submit your entries, visit https://constancelopez.com/ouap-bingo

Series Information

Once Upon A Prince
The Unlucky Prince by Deborah Grace White
The Beggar Prince by Kate Stradling
The Golden Prince by Alice Ivinya
The Wicked Prince by Celeste Baxendell
The Midnight Prince by Angie Grigaliunas
The Poisoned Prince by Kristin J. Dawson
The Silver Prince by Lyndsey Hall
The Shoeless Prince by Jacque Stevens
The Silent Prince by C. J. Brightley
The Crownless Prince by Selina R. Gonzalez
The Awakened Prince Alora Carter
The Winter Prince by Constance Lopez
Grab the whole Once Upon A Prince series here!

Afterword

Thank you for reading *The Silent Prince*! If you enjoyed it, please leave a review! If you'd like to check out my other works, you can find a complete list on my website. If you'd like a quick note when I publish a new book or short story, please sign up for my newsletter! I sometimes send out information on contests, giveaways, and how to snag review copies, too. If you're on social media, you can find me on Facebook.

About the Author

Thank you for purchasing this book. If you enjoyed it, please leave a review at your favorite online retailer!

C. J. Brightley lives in Northern Virginia with her husband and young children. She holds degrees from Clemson University and Texas A&M. You can find more of C. J. Brightley's books at www.CJBrightley.com, including the epic fantasy series Erdemen Honor, which begins with *The King's Sword*, and the Christian fantasy series A Long-Forgotten Song, which begins with *Things Unseen*.

Sneak Peek

THE LORD OF DREAMS

PROLOGUE

When Claire was seven, she had a very strange dream.

Impossibly tall trees towered above her, the sound of their distant rustling like whispers. The air in the dappled shadows was cool and still, broken only by a murmuring of unseen water. Claire looked down at her bare feet, skin pale against the deep green moss covering the earth. Static made her pink nightgown cling to her slim legs.

Where was she?

A fluttering overhead caught her ear, and she looked up, her eyes searching the shadowed branches. Nothing was visible, but the whispering of the leaves seemed to increase ominously. She began walking carefully toward the sound of water, chewing her lip.

What was this place?

Her feet padded on the moss as if it were thick green carpet, soft and cool against her skin. She made her way through sparse brush, the leaves parting before her invitingly.

Screech!

The sudden cry behind her made her start in fear, and she froze, looking back into the shadows. It was darker, as if the sun had not only disappeared behind a cloud, but descended to the horizon in a matter of moments.

Her heart thudded, and she whimpered a little. Another angry cry gave wings to her feet.

She flew through the brush, tiny twigs and leaves slapping her in the face and across the arms. She glanced behind her once, not sure what she expected to see.

Green eyes glinted in the twilight.

Claire cried out and stumbled when her foot hit a nearly buried rock. She fell headlong, her hands splashing into a pool of water.

“You aren’t right. You’re not what you’re supposed to be!”

Claire looked up to see a boy of about her own age glaring down at her.

“There’s a… a…” She pointed helplessly behind her, too terrified to look for the eyes of the creature that had pursued her.

“Yes. A cockatrice.” The boy’s blue glare intensified. His eyes were rimmed in red, and she had a fleeting thought that perhaps he had been weeping. “You should know better than to wake a sleeping cockatrice.” His eyes flicked behind her with a frisson of fear, and he grabbed her shoulder. “Back you go, then.” He pushed her into the pool of water, hurrying her deeper while glancing over his shoulder. A final shove sent her flailing, the water closing over her head. Her last glimpse of him was of his silver-white hair plastered down by water, one arm flung up against a beaked maw that struck with cobra-like speed. Claire screamed, water filling her mouth.

She woke, trembling and sweaty, tangled in her blankets.

PART I

CHAPTER 1

Nine Years Later

Icy rain gusted into Claire's face a full block before she made it home. She shrieked and ran faster, her backpack lurching awkwardly, the thin soles of her shoes slapping on the wet pavement. Damp tendrils of hair whipped across her face as she fumbled with her key.

She tumbled inside, grumbling about the storm and her wet feet, dripping water across the floor as she strode toward the stairs. "Anyone home?"

Silence answered her.

"It *would* be too much to ask. 'How was your day, Claire? Happy birthday, Claire! We made you a cake!' Or something, anyway." She scowled into the darkness of the kitchen, blinking in the sudden light as her fingers found the switch. "But *no*. They're out celebrating something else. Not me. Not on my sixteenth birthday. That would be too much. They probably forgot about it."

A folded piece of paper leaned against the vase of flowers in the middle of the table and she snatched it up, hope briefly lighting in her eyes before dying away. The flowers weren't for her; they'd been there for almost a week and had been for her mother from her father. But the card must be a birthday card!

Claire, we're out for dinner with Dad's clients tonight. I'm pretty sure I told you, but I wasn't sure if you remembered it was today. I'm sorry to miss your birthday, but this is important to your father and we can't miss it. Ethan's spending the night with Nate. There's frozen lasagna you can heat up. We can go out this weekend; you pick the place.

Love you Sweetie,

Mom

Claire wiped furious tears from her eyes. "Of course it's important. It's anything but me." She stomped to the freezer and yanked it open, seeing the foil tin of lasagna right on top, just as promised. "I hate lasagna."

She stomped upstairs and into her room, aware but not caring that she left damp footprints across the pale carpet. Scowling, she stripped out of her wet clothes and pulled on flannel pajamas, flopped down on her bed, and buried her face in her pillow. She screamed, muffling the sound not because she didn't want to be heard but because it felt more satisfying somehow. The warm, damp air filtered back onto her face as if in validation of her anger. The sound was louder inside her head than in her ears.

Claire flung the pillow across the room, where it hit the bookcase, dislodging several of her knickknacks. She gave a dramatic groan, then heaved herself off the bed and across the room, where she snatched up the pillow and threw it back onto her bed. She replaced the little resin figurines with more care, checking to make sure they hadn't been damaged.

"Stupid temper. Stupid me. Stupid expecting to be important for once. Stupid birthday. They don't care at all!" Tears streamed down her face. "Stupid me being upset by it! Who cares? It's just Claire. No one important. No one that matters." A pain in her hand made her glance down to find she was clenching a little resin fairy so hard that one of the wings had snapped, a jagged point digging into the soft flesh of her palm. "Stupid breakable fairies. I wish…"

A breath of air across the back of her neck made her shiver suddenly. She glared at the fairy figurine and put it back on the shelf with unnecessary force.

Claire, you're being ridiculous. Mom told you about dinner two days ago. She sighed and stood up, shivering as her wet hair slithered inside her collar. Maybe a hot shower would improve her mood.

Half an hour later, she slouched downstairs. She'd piled her dark hair in a messy heap on top of her head and clipped it, hoping for curls the next day, but she knew it wouldn't work. It never worked.

She stared disconsolately at the frozen lasagna and groaned. "I still hate lasagna." Instead, she pulled a box of cookies from the pantry and ate five of them, washing them down with a glass of milk. Then, feeling vaguely guilty, she picked up an apple and crunched on it as she wandered back upstairs.

Claire didn’t have much homework, just a few problem sets for Intro to Physics and a section of reading for her Shakespeare class. She glared at it half-heartedly.

I hate being a teenager. I hate my temper.

Rain beat against the window, angry drops that matched her mood.

A crack of lightning made her jump. She stepped toward the window and looked out into the furious darkness. The streetlight near the end of the driveway glowed weakly through sheets of rain. The maple by the corner of the house whipped in the wind. There would be broken branches to clean up tomorrow.

She tossed the little paperback copy of Romeo and Juliet at her still-wet backpack and sniffled. “I don’t know what Juliet’s problem was. At least someone loved her!” She snorted. “Ok, Claire, even you know that’s ridiculous.” She glanced across the room at the little fairy figurines lined up along one shelf. She had a whole shelf of tiny fairies, resin and pewter and crystal, all different shapes and sizes. The shelf above it had other fantastical creatures: several unicorns of various colors and materials, a tiny pewter knight in shining armor, a variety of little goblins and gnomes with expressions ranging from sweet curiosity to diabolical mischief, a crystal griffin, a sphinx carved of blonde wood, and others.

“I wish…” The hair on the back of her neck stood up, and she shuddered. She looked around, with the suddenly uncomfortable sense of being under scrutiny. “That’s stupid. There’s nothing here.”

She brushed her teeth and went to bed, snuggling with the ragged bear she’d loved since childhood. She knew it was silly; on her sixteenth birthday, she should be willing to go to bed without a stuffed toy. But tonight she felt lonely and sad. Abandoned. The anger faded, leaving only a childish grief and a longing for someone, anyone, to make her feel important.

As always, she told herself stories as she fell asleep, stories of fantastic adventure and extraordinary heroism. She was always the heroine, of course, brave and steadfast in the face of whatever phantasms her mind could conjure. Last summer she’d researched dreams, and she suspected she didn’t really dream of adventure at all. Only the stories she told herself were adventurous, not the dreams themselves. Her dreams were quite ordinary, just disconnected images, fears, and memories of her perfectly boring life.

Showing up at school only to find herself naked. Getting a D on her trigonometry test. The cute boy in English class laughing at her.

Yet in the stories she told herself, she was important. Sometimes beloved, sometimes shunned (always unjustly), but always important. She made her own way, carving out a place for herself among the heroes of whatever land she imagined. Often, she was a princess because they were her stories and she wanted to be a princess. Sometimes, she was the heroine, courageously standing against whatever danger threatened some helpless innocent. In her imaginary adventures, she focused on the dramatic climax and the triumphant aftermath, defying the villain with brilliant words and acts of valor, earning the accolades of her adoring subjects. She was always beautiful; her hair curled in perfect ringlets, sometimes blonde, sometimes dark. Never was her hair as it was in reality, a medium brown with waves but no curls.

This night she imagined a castle, neglected but still beautiful, all white stone with intricate arches casting shadows in the dying evening light. Perhaps the windows used to hold stained glass, but they were empty now, a cool wind curling softly around the worn stones, carrying a few dried leaves through the deserted courtyard.

She murmured into her pillow, “I wish… I wish I could be the hero.”

Her window slammed open, wind howling inside with a flurry of rain. Claire shrieked, clapping her hands over her ears as she fought free of the covers.

Terror made her heart stutter.

A shadow stood between her and the window. It stepped forward, and in the strobe-like flash of lightning she saw his face.

He waved a hand, and the window closed behind him, the storm suddenly muffled.

With trembling fingers she flipped on her bedside lamp.

He tilted his head and looked at her, a faint, toothy smile lifting his lips. His clothes might have been leather, thick and dark, with a faint, unsettling texture across his chest. Tight, dark breeches were tucked into black boots. His hands were gloved in a similar dark material. His cloak (*who wears a cloak?*) swirled and settled behind him, the edges ragged, made of feathers or perhaps tattered cloth. The exaggerated collar spread around his angular face, making it appear narrower and paler. High, sharp cheekbones caught the light below glittering eyes of an indistinct color, blue

and gold and silver all at once. His hair was long and white blonde; it stuck straight out and up from his head, unaffected by gravity, fine as dandelion fluff.

He let her study him, his smile widening slowly as he watched her fear rise until it nearly choked her.

“Come.” He held out a gloved hand to her so dark it seemed to suck in the light around it.

Her breath squeaked, and she gasped, “Who are you?”

His teeth gleamed, sharp and predatory. “Your villain.”